

Hidden

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Summary: It has been two years since the Battle of the Bewilderbeast, and Berk is peaceful and prosperous. But when the village falls under threat and Astrid is captured, an unlikely discovery leads to an unlikely alliance, and the end of a long and bitter conflict.

1. Chapter 1

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><p>Prologue:<p>

_This is Berk. In the past, it has been described as difficult, problematic, uncomfortable, even miserable. True, life here is a constant struggle for survival: where once we contended with dragon raids and tribal hostilities, we now face such mundane problems as crop failure, frozen wells, house fires, and domestic troubles.

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_But life isn't all toil, sweat, and hardship: there's the sweetness of familial love, the satisfaction of individual accomplishment, the daily wonder of living with dragons, and the excitement of the annual Dragon Races. These have become a cornerstone of our society and a highlight of the year: every summer, the youth of the village, led by its completely irrepressible chief, mount their fiery, winged steeds for several rounds of healthy competition. Dragon Races mean village holidays, a break from daily drudgery, and a chance to let it all out in wild, whooping exuberance. _

_It's been over a year since I last participated. Sometimes I miss it, the thrill of the chase, the rush of adrenaline, the euphoria of victory. But it is for the best, and I shouldn't be wistful; my priorities have changed with time. Stormfly races with my sister

Brenna: she's talented, driven, and determined to carry on the family reputation. This is her first summer competing, and she is doing her training proud. As for me, I have two much bigger responsibilities to look after: my husband Hiccup, who will take any risk and try any daredevil stunt just for the adrenaline rush; and our beautiful son Erling Stoick Haddock, six months old, healthy, and full of energy. Giving up Dragon Racing was a small price to pay for such a gift.

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Chapter 1:

Astrid sat on the chieftain's platform, her babe in her arms, hearing the roar of the crowd, the whistle of wind over dragon wings, and the occasional soft _thump_ of a sheep hitting the nets. The final Dragon Race of the summer was the most exciting the village had seen for some time. Hiccup was winning, but only just; Gustav, Brenna, Gunnar, and Ingmar were close behind, all of them vying to outdo each other and their chief. They were the crÃ"me de la crÃ"me, the best that Berk's Dragon Academy could offer. And they were doing their teacher very proud.

They raced around the island's perimeter, buzzing rooftops, narrowly avoiding sea-stacks, trading insults and friendly jibes when they got close enough. The sun shone high in the sky, its rays alighting on wings and faces streaked with vibrant and barbaric racing paint, and glittering on the water. The day was perfect, the sunshine reflecting the general mood and painting Berk in the vivid colors of late summer.

From the stands, the villagers cheered and roared, gasping at every feat of aerial skill, urging their favorites on, here and there passing friendly wagers back and forth. Fishlegs Ingerman, as the headmaster of the Dragon Academy, officiated from the center of the main platform, his head bobbing up and down in excitement as he counted off each lap in succession. Snotlout Jorgenson sat next to his father Spitelout, drinking and laughing and occasionally sparing the race some attention. The Thorston twins lurked in the crowd, popping up in a new location from time to time, Tuffnut keeping a running commentary on the events of the game.

Astrid grinned broadly, bouncing the baby up and down and cheering just as loudly as the rest of the village. At the end of a long, warm summer, with her husband soaring triumphantly over the sea of faces and her child giggling with delight, it was a good day to be alive.

* * *

><p>Astrid woke early the next morning, her arms stiff and hair all awry. The baby was fretting softly in his cradle, proclaiming his hunger to the new dawn. Astrid rose and lifted him gently, settling herself back on the bed and unlacing her nightdress to suckle him. Her movements woke Hiccup, who stirred and yawned.<p>

"Good morning, beautiful," he croaked, rolling over to look up at her face. "Both of you."

"You're looking rather handsome yourself," she returned drily. His hair, ordinarily windblown, was a riot of wiry spikes, stubby braids, and flattened waves, his eyes gummy from sleep. The effect was

something akin to a yak in a rainstorm. Astrid stifled a laugh at the thought.

Seeing her smile, Hiccup raised himself on one elbow and kissed her before plopping back down and stroking the baby's fuzz of red hair. "Good morning, Erling, pride of our lives," he whispered and kissed the baby's head.

"Don't you think that's a big expectation for our son to fill?" Astrid asked, rocking back and forth as her child nursed.

"No," Hiccup returned, quietly but firmly. "Just telling him that I love him and I'm proud of him, no matter his size or his skill or his strength."

Astrid understood; Hiccup had few regrets in his life, but the greatest of them concerned his relationship with his own dead father.

"So," he said, rising and changing the subject abruptly, "what monumental tasks lie before us today?" There was eagerness in his voice.

Astrid shifted, trying to find a more comfortable position. "Have you forgotten what day it is?"

He paused in the process of attaching his metal foot and regarded her quizzically.

"Hiccup, it's the first day after the second full moon after Mid-Summer," she explained patiently. When her answer met with a look of confusion, she gave up and baldly stated, "The first day of harvest. I knew you would forget."

"Well then, it's a good thing I have you to remind me," he teased, snapping the last buckle into place and standing up with an air of unconcerned nonchalance.

Finding Erling asleep, she rose and laid him back in his cradle. Then, approaching her husband, she embraced him from behind, laying her head between his shoulder blades.

"I was hoping we could start the harvest together," she murmured, breathing in his scent. "Like starting a family tradition. What do you say?"

At this Hiccup turned and put his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry, Astrid. Fishlegs is busy today, and with winter coming we'll soon run out of opportunities for Dragon Training." He paused. "I promised to take the top class to Changewing Island today for a training mission."

"Oh," she said in a small voice. Then she frowned, thinking. "Changewing Island? I thought you decided nobody could go there. It's too dangerous."

He shrugged. "They won't know to avoid it if they don't know where it is. The last thing we want is another 'stone of good fortune' incident."

Astrid grimaced, remembering all too well. That had been a disastrous day. "What happened to 'occupational hazard'?" she asked, attempting to lighten the mood somewhat.

"We're not gonna' disturb the Changewings, just look at the island and go over a few relevant points."

"Don't forget to mention 'invisible' and 'hot acid-spitting death' and 'extremely maternal'," she reminded him, emphasizing each point with a poke in the side.

He wriggled, dancing away from her finger before catching her around the waist and drawing her close once more. "I hear and obey, m'lady," he said gallantly, "and I'll be back in time for dinner, as long as you're not cooking."

"Oh, you-" she growled, attempting to punch him. He caught her wrist and drew it toward his mouth, kissing her fingers lightly.

"Don't worry, Astrid," he assured her, "I'll take good care of the students, and we'll be fine."

She withdrew her hand. "You're the chief, I suppose. But be safe," she said, giving him an earnest look.

"I will," he replied, "I promise. And I'll see you later." With another quick kiss he was off, descending the stairs as swiftly and softly as his metal foot would allow.

With a tiny sigh of mingled amusement and disappointment, Astrid went about the business of preparing to face the day.

* * *

><p>Hours later, she straightened from her work, wiping a film of sweat from her brow. A few feet from where she stood in the grain field, Erling cooed happily in his basket. It was late afternoon, and the first day of harvesting was drawing to a close. Astrid inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of the earth, the sea, the freshly cut herbage. Around her, the other harvesters also stood, stretching their aching backs and calling friendly jibes to each other. They had done a good day's work, she and the men, women, and children of the village. When Hiccup returned with the young dragon riders, he would be so pleased: judging from the state of the day's crop, it was going to be a prosperous harvest, with more than enough to keep them all through the winter.<p>

Grasping her short scythe loosely, Astrid lifted Erling's basket over one shoulder and made her way to the stream that flowed parallel to the field. She knelt at the water's edge, cupping her hands to drink deeply and splash cool liquid on her face. Around her, the others chattered happily, their laughter ringing off the stones at stream's edge. The first day of harvest was a day of celebration, when those normally occupied by other tasks and duties pitched in together; after today, they would return to their normal jobs, leaving the tasks of drying, threshing, and grinding to the farmers and millers among them. But for one day at least, they all worked together. Mostly. Lifting Erling out of the basket and setting him on her hip, Astrid sat down on a large boulder to rest.

Sitting there, she watched the last few men leaving the field, her gaze drawn by a tall, muscular young man wielding the largest and heaviest of the scythes. He swung it in one final wide arc, shearing the grain off close to the ground. Laying the scythe down carefully, he knelt and gathered the loose stalks into a rough stack to be retrieved later. He stood then, his long dark hair coming loose from its braid, and lifted his scythe before walking back down the hill toward the village. As Astrid watched him go, she was approached by one of the village women, one whom she knew well.

"Mind if I join you?" Ruffnut asked.

Astrid shifted to make room for her friend.

Ruffnut leaned over to tickle the baby's soft cheek; he gurgled, scrunching his eyes and wiggling to evade her searching finger. Ruffnut chuckled and withdrew her hand, watching as Erling stuffed his thumb into his mouth and sucked contentedly.

"He's such a happy baby," Ruffnut commented, her smile not quite reaching her eyes.

"He is, thank Odin," Astrid agreed. "I don't know what we would do if, on top of everything else, we had a frail, fussy child to look after. As it is, Hiccup's so busy I hardly see him from day to day."

"Where is he now?" Ruffnut asked, her long braids swinging as she surveyed the newly-harvested field.

"Oh, he's not here," Astrid answered quickly. "He took Fishlegs' students to Changewing Island today."

"Speaking of students, do you hear much from the Academy?"

"A little bit now and then," Astrid responded, shifting Erling so that he sat on her lap. "Hiccup doesn't have time for much more than the occasional training flight with the older students, but Fishlegs is doing quite well as instructor. And Valka is helping so much; she just...knows them. The dragons, I mean. So when she's not helping me with Erling, she's either in the stables with the dragons, or assisting at the Academy."

"And the students?"

"By all accounts, much sharper than we were in Dragon Training."

"Hm." Throughout their conversation, Ruffnut had been fidgeting constantly, by turns chewing on a braid, tapping her fingers on the boulder they shared, or stealing fleeting glances at field, stream, and villagers.

Astrid had noticed. "Ruffnut, are you okay?" she asked. "Is there something wrong?"

Ruffnut's face flushed and her ears turned pink. "No, nothing's wrong," she said quickly. "Everything's fine, why would you think something's wrong?"

"You don't seem yourself today, that's all," Astrid remarked, attempting to placate the other young woman.

Ruffnut stood abruptly. "I need to go, Astrid," she said quickly. "I'll talk to you later."

"Goodbye, Ruff," Astrid called as her friend trotted away down the field, wending her way between the neatly piled stacks of harvested crops. Astrid lingered a bit longer, enjoying the sun's last rays before it dipped behind the island's western hills. Standing then, she lifted her child up and twirled him around, eliciting more giggles. The two of them were still twirling and laughing when a small boy from the village picked his way through the chatting workers and met them at the water's edge.

"Astrid, ma'am," he cried, clutching at her skirts, "they sent me to find you. You need to come quickly!"

"What is it, Calder?" Astrid asked, recognizing Ingmar's younger brother. "Who sent you?"

"Ingmar and the other riders," the boy responded, clearly upset. "There was an accident; you need to come now."

Without another word, Astrid tucked Erling back into his basket and followed the boy toward the village, cold dread settling like a stone in the pit of her stomach.

* * *

><p>AN: This story is written in its entirety and will be updated on a regular schedule, probably on Tuesdays and Fridays. Hope you enjoyed the first chapter!**

2. Chapter 2

Chapter 2:

The sun had set fully when they reached the village, the twilight deepening rapidly. Astrid had been able to learn very little from Calder as they walked: it was clear the boy was but a messenger, and knew nothing. She approached her home with a firm tread, but shaking hands. Toothless was outside, keening and scratching at the door with his blunt claws, begging to be allowed in. Astrid laid a hand on his head and he pressed upward into her touch, seemingly grateful for a shred of comfort.

"Go on home, Calder," she told the boy, willing herself to speak calmly. Calder bobbed his head and hurried away, his short legs carrying him to his mother's embrace.

Steeling herself, Astrid lifted the latch and entered the house. It was warm after the cool of early night, a fire already flickering brightly in the hearth. Valka was sitting at the table, slowly stitching something long and white. Catching sight of Astrid, she laid the fabric carefully on the table before her and stood.

Astrid set the basket gently down on the floor. Erling, long since asleep, took no notice and continued sucking his thumb as he

dreamed.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice low.

"I cannae tell ye, Astrid," Valka responded, matching her volume. "The students were so frightened, they did little more than babble. But they brought 'im back alive, and there's something to be said for that."

"Hiccup!" Astrid breathed, her worst fears confirmed. "Where is he?"

Valka nodded at the stairs, then turned to face her daughter-in-law again. "Ye'll not like what ye see," she warned.

Astrid bit her lip and climbed the stairs, pausing on the threshold of the bedchamber.

Hiccup lay in their bed, very still, but for his chest rising and falling slowly. From the bridge of his nose up, his head was swathed in bandages, his eyes and ears completely covered. His hands lay on the coverlet at his sides; Astrid noted that the left one was also bandaged.

Taking a deep, calming breath, she approached and sat on the side of the bed, gently taking his uninjured right hand in her own. She sat thus for a few minutes, stroking his hand with her thumb.

"You promised, Hiccup," she whispered, "you promised you'd be safe. Don't you dare break your promise!"

He made no response.

The candle on the windowsill flickered, its light guttering in the faint breeze blowing down from the hills. Shadows flickered over the cradle, Toothless' stone perch in the corner, the stuffed toy Nadder on the headboard. She stood, lifting the fitful illumination down and holding it near enough to examine him more closely. His chin sported a faint growth of dark beard, and above the stubble his skin was pale, freckles standing out more than ever. Just below the bandages, Astrid could see the merest edge of angry red.

Feeling suddenly afraid and ashamed, she left the candle on the floor and descended the stairs, tears stinging her cheeks.

Valka had resumed her seat at the table and was once again sewing quietly. Going to the door, Astrid opened it and Toothless bounded in, distracted anxiety in every movement as he climbed the stairs in search of his rider.

"Be careful up there, Toothless," she murmured after him. One responsibility dispensed with, Astrid lifted Erling out of his basket and sat down in front of the fire.

For a long time they sat there, Valka sewing, Astrid rocking her babe, neither one speaking. Astrid could hear Toothless softly keening in the upper room: no doubt he could smell Hiccup's injuries and the scent upset him. At long last, Valka finished stitching, knotting the thread and folding the length of cloth into a neat square. She sat down next to her daughter-in-law, her gaze lingering

over the young woman and her child.

"The little laddie has your nose," she said at last.

With a faint sigh, Astrid looked down at her son. The baby dreamed on, blissfully unaware of both his grandmother's scrutiny and the tears shining on his mother's cheeks.

"Get it out, Astrid," she said quietly, placing her arm around the girl's shoulder. "It helps to talk. Even if there are only dragons to listen."

"I keep thinking about the last time he was injured, all those years ago," Astrid began, her voice a whisper. "I don't think he knows just how close we came to losing him. And it was so hard, there was nothing I could do to help, there was so much I wanted to tell him and I couldn't, and nobody was allowed near him except Toothless and Gothi." At that, Astrid paused and turned slightly to look Valka in the eye. "Was Gothi here?"

"Yes, she was," Valka responded reassuringly. "She said to let him rest, and she'll be by in the morning. We cannae do anything else for him 'til tomorrow."

Astrid sighed again, her shoulders sagging perceptibly.

"Would it help ye to fly?"

She looked up suddenly, something flickering briefly in her eyes before she shook her head. "No; Hiccup asked me to...we- we decided that it's best if I stay on the ground. With Erling. I haven't flown since we learned he was coming."

Valka didn't understand the reasoning behind that decision: Astrid's pregnancy and childbearing had been hard, but no more so than most others. But she held her peace and patted her daughter-in-law on the shoulder. "Would ye like me to stay t'night?" she asked kindly.

"No," Astrid replied. "We'll be fine. After all, we have Toothless with us."

Valka noted the attempt at a smile and returned it. "I'll be back in the mornin' then. Ye won't have to face Gothi alone." With that she rose, donning her mantle and slipping out quietly.

Astrid slowly made her way up the stairs carrying Erling, who was still sleeping soundly. Toothless, now silent, watched her as she laid the infant in his cradle. The candle was nearly consumed, its light feebler than ever. Astrid settled on the floor next to Toothless and laid her arm over his neck. He nuzzled against her cheek, his warmth making her drowsy.

"Oh, Toothless," she murmured, "what are we going to do with him?"

The dragon made no answer, and they watched together until the candle died, its flame extinguished in a puddle of tallow that glistened like a pool of tears.

* * *

><p>In the dim, grey twilight before dawn, Astrid awoke. Her joints were stiff, her stomach was growling, and she was half-kneeling on the floor with her arms draped over the bed. Disoriented, she rubbed at a painful crick in her neck and lifted her head. The sight of her husband's inert form in the bed brought the events of the previous day back in a rush; Astrid stood quickly, too quickly, and had to sit back down until the room stopped spinning.<p>

Hiccup was sleeping, his breathing deep and regular. That was a good sign: it meant no fever, as yet. Relieved, Astrid stood again, more slowly this time, and picked up her now fussing son. As she sat, perched on the edge of the bed feeding him, she heard the creak of the front door swinging open on its leather hinges. Toothless lifted his head from where he lay curled on the floor.

"Valka," Astrid said simply. He seemed to understand, for he immediately uncurled and stood, stretching like a cat and padding forward to lay his nose next to his rider's hand.

Hiccup's fingers twitched, curling into a fist and relaxing again. Then he raised his hand slowly and set it atop the dragon's nose. Toothless purred, a deep rumble welling from the depths of his ribcage.

"Toothless?" Hiccup murmured, turning his head toward the dragon. Astrid leaned forward and laid her hand atop his.

"It's not just Toothless," she said. "Erling and I are here too."

"Astrid," Hiccup gasped, "I'm so sorry."

She laced her fingers through his and squeezed gently. "What happened, Hiccup?"

A tense pause. "There was something wrong at the island," he began, his voice soft. "The Changewings were all stirred up; I don't know why." He took a deep breath and continued. "I told the riders to fall back and stay away: Gunnar didn't. I don't know if his dragon was spooked or if he just didn't listen, but he swooped in and I had to go get him out."

"And after that?" Astrid prompted.

"After that, it was all insanity: maddened dragons everywhere, uncamouflaged, and spitting acid like the devil. I don't remember any of it clearly."

Erling chose that moment to cry lustily, tiny fists flailing weakly and green eyes leaking tears. Astrid shushed him, rocking him gently in her arms until his screams subsided into intermittent hiccups.

"Hiccup, was anyone else hurt?" she asked, voice edged with concern.

"I don't know," he admitted. "But Astrid, when Toothless and I dove in to cover Gunnar, I saw something: there were men on the island,

running from the Changewings."

"Who?" Astrid breathed. "And what were they doing there?"

"Two more things I don't know," he said bitterly.

Below them, the front door creaked again and they heard Valka greet the newcomer. Slow footsteps mounting the stairs heralded the arrival of Gothi, sage, healer, and village elder. She peered into the room, which was growing brighter by the minute as the sun rose. Astrid rose, beckoning Toothless away to make room for the wizened old woman.

Setting down the clay pot she carried and grasping the injured chief's wrist, Gothi set to work with a firmness and efficiency that surprised her audience. Astrid watched as Gothi took the injured hand and peeled away the bandage: the skin beneath was severely burned, red, raw, and puckering around the fingers. Astrid silently thanked Odin that Hiccup still had fingers. Gothi dipped cloth into the pot and smoothed the thick, dark-colored ointment over the damaged hand, taking care to cover each finger: Hiccup hissed in pain but kept his hand still as she worked. Taking more cloth, she wrapped it around the hand, tying the bandage off with a small but secure knot.

She moved to Hiccup's head then, neither weakness nor sentimentality slowing her movements. The bandage came off in one long coil and Astrid nearly cried out at the ruin beneath. Much of his dark hair was cut or burned away, the stubby braids sticking out awkwardly from the back of his head. Like his fingers, his forehead was puckered, blotchy red burns marring fair skin. But his eyes, his beautiful green eyes, were devastated. His eyelashes and brows were gone, the skin ravaged, and his pupils and irises had gone milky white.

She looked away as Gothi repeated the process, hugging Erling to herself as she fought back tears. When the wise woman had finished, she took up her ornamented staff and left, her visit swift, silent, and without a word of sympathy.

"Well," Hiccup muttered through clenched teeth when she had gone, "that could have been better."

"Oh, Hiccup," Astrid whimpered, her voice shaking.

"Does it really look that bad?" he asked. When she didn't answer, his chin dropped to his chest. "I broke my promise, didn't I?" he murmured.

Again unable to reply, she resumed her seat at his side, Toothless on the floor at her feet. They sat there, Toothless lowing softly from time to time, Erling's gurgles an incongruous addition to the melancholy scene.

* * *

><p>Several leagues to the southeast, the sun also rose over Changewing Island, early morning rays hazy in the smoke of a charred and broken fleet. On the shore, men sat nursing their wounds, or lay where they had fallen. As they rose one by one, each approached their leader, waiting for orders.<p>

"Ship captains, take your crews and assess the damage," came the command. "I want at least one ship ready to sail by nightfall. The rest of you, spread out and comb this island for any place sheltered from the weather. And don't wake the dragons."

Subdued murmurs of "Aye, sir," sounded across the beach, and Dagur the Deranged stood to his full and insignificant height, surveying the beach and damaged fleet with a critical eye.

If they could get off this island, then the expedition wouldn't be a failure after all. They had what they had come for: they had the eggs, twelve of them, each glowing brightly like an infernal jewel fit for some diabolical diadem. And Dagur wasn't one to let a golden, glowing-gemstone-studded opportunity slip away.

3. Chapter 3

Chapter 3:

After Gothi's visit, Astrid's many responsibilities were almost subsumed by the overwhelming desire to stay with Hiccup. Valka volunteered to mind Erling for the day and Gobber promised to take any chieftaincy- or village-related questions in his smithy. Astrid accepted their help numbly, grateful for the space their offers afforded her. Even temporarily deprived of their chief, the village could cope well enough, despite what most of them believed.

Truth be told, Astrid knew that most of the village was still unaware of what had happened. It had been mid-afternoon when the Dragon riders returned, and most of the villagers were in the fields or boats, busied with their daily tasks. When they did learn what had transpired, Astrid had no idea how they would react, and she didn't care to find out.

Foremost in her mind was a confrontation that would not be put off. Shortly after the sun hit its zenith, with Erling napping contentedly and Hiccup sitting quietly at home, she sought out Gunnar; she found him sitting disconsolately in the arena, leaning against Wildwing, a beautiful green Nadder. Gunnar was seventeen, a talented and competitive dragon rider, confident in his abilities and requiring a strict hand to keep him in line. Astrid sat down on the ground next to him, reaching up to scratch the dragon's scales, and the boy jumped, clearly startled by her presence.

"Astrid, ma'am," Gunnar stuttered, eyes on the ground. "I'm- I'm...so sorry about yesterday."

Astrid gripped his forearm as Wildwing turned his fierce head to stare at both of them. "What happened, Gunnar?" she asked, her voice low. "Did Wildwing spook because of the Changewings?"

Gunnar raised his head, quick to defend his dragon. "It wasn't Wildwing's fault, he had nothing to do with it." He stared at her for a moment, then the words tumbled out in a bitter torrent of confession. "It was my fault: I didn't listen to the order. I went charging in and the chief could be dead now because of me."

"He's not dead," Astrid replied evenly, "but Gunnar, I need to know exactly what happened. I need you to tell me."

Gunnar hung his head, a posture all too indicative of his shame. Then he spoke, relating all that Hiccup had told her and more, his culpability a scorching undertone to the narrative.

"There was one Changewing, bigger than the others, that got on my tail and started chasing us. Wildwing couldn't outfly it, and we couldn't get away. I thought we were done for. Then the chief and Toothless got in front of it and faced it down. They were amazing, and I thought they would tame it right then. But it didn't happen. The thing spooked and spat, right at the chief, too fast to avoid it. He took the acid in his face, then somehow Toothless took over and led us out," he concluded. "Toothless saved his life, and probably the rest of us as well."

Wildwing stood, moving to nuzzle his rider. Gunnar stroked the dragon's horn, unable to meet Astrid's gaze. "It took us a long time to get back, and Gustav had to ride Toothless and try to keep Hiccup conscious. I kept thinking all the time of how the acid was still burning; of how much it must've hurt." His breath hitched in his distress. "Will you tell him...I'm sorry?"

"I will," she responded, laying a gentle hand on his shoulder. "You should go home," she prompted.

He nodded, grunting an incoherent response, and trudged out of the arena, Wildwing following forlornly in his wake. Astrid watched him go, her thoughts drifting over the sea to where the waves washed the shores of Changewing Island.

* * *

><p>In the smithy, Gobber laid down the scythe he'd been sharpening and looked around at the cluttered space. He'd never taken another apprentice after Hiccup; when the war ended, there was less work to do and no real need for constant help. But some days he dearly wished for an extra pair of hands to augment his one and a half.<p>

He sat down gingerly, groaning at the creak in his remaining joints, and watched a slowly growing figure that descended the highest hill in town and approached the cliffs. It was Valka, her grandson bouncing on her hip.

As she walked, she spoke to these she met, bestowing a kind word here, a gentle touch there. Gobber watched her, admiring her calmness, her graciousness, her self-assurance, the certainty of her carriage. Even in the midst of trouble, she carried herself with the dignity and authority of a chieftain's wife and experienced dragon rider.

So he wasn't at all surprised, when her path eventually led to his open door, that she knocked courteously before entering. Erling, wide eyes staring at nothing in particular, was sucking his fist, recently shed tears drying on his cheeks.

"Gettin' the little un' some air, are ya?" Gobber asked.

"His mother's out and he's been cooped up all day, poor lamb," she replied. "He's become quite fractious today."

"And 'ow's 'is father?"

She exhaled slowly. "Still in pain, I think, but restless and wanting ta get out."

"Well, he's a quick one, he is, and ye can tell 'im from me that he better recover quick, because smithing is enough job for one man without addin' chiefing on top." His tone was perhaps a little too loud and boisterous, for it set Erling crying again. The next few minutes were spent trying to calm and shush him, Gobber's efforts ineffectual, Valka's only slightly less so.

When Erling's screams had subsided and his fist was once again firmly ensconced in his mouth, Valka rose. "I'll take my leave then, Gobber," she said. "Goodnight to ya."

"Oh, before ye go, there's somethin' I nearly forgot ta tell ye," he interjected. She looked at him, expectant. "It's just that dragon-trappin' lad, Eret, he was 'ere today. He says 'e needs the chief's consent to claim a piece o' land."

"What for?"

"Wanted to build somethin', 'e said."

Valka frowned. "What did ya tell 'im?"

"I told 'im I didn't know about that and 'e will 'ave to ask Hiccup. 'E seemed impatient ta start."

Knowing Eret, Valka could readily imagine his impatience. Once again bidding Gobber a quiet "Goodnight," she climbed back up the hill, cradling the baby in her strong arms.

* * *

><p>Astrid rubbed her temples tiredly. She'd sought out Gustav, Brenna, and Ingmar that afternoon and asked them the same question she'd asked Gunnar. They all told the same story with varying amounts of detail: maddened Changewings, unidentified men on the ground, Gunnar's reckless dive into the fray, and Toothless' prompt action to get them out. Something still bothered her: the thought of strangers so near, strangers who were willing to even approach Changewing Island, was unwelcome news and boded ill for the future.<p>

Overcome with weariness, she turned her steps toward home, hoping against hope that Gothi wouldn't be there.

Gothi wasn't in the Haddock house, but Valka was, her presence a welcome sight to her weary daughter-in-law. The day was drawing down toward dusk and Valka stoked the fire, softly humming a sweet, wordless lullaby to the baby in his basket. Astrid entered the house and climbed the stairs, rubbing her son's head as she walked past.

Hiccup sat in their bed, his eyes still covered, but he turned his head at the sound of her step.

"Astrid?"

"I'm here."

A sigh, possibly of relief. He reached out with his right hand and she took it in hers, squeezing his fingers reassuringly. In his corner, Toothless lifted his head to watch them.

"Toothless and I have been talking," Hiccup began, then paused. "Well, actually, I've been talking and Toothless has been listening. I have a theory about those men we saw."

"Yes?" she prompted, grateful for the distraction from the terrible reality that lay just beneath his bandages.

"Changewing eggs glow, like gems," he continued. "What if those men were stealing them?"

That thought had not occurred to her. "For what purpose?" she asked. "Surely they would have known what the eggs were. Why would anyone steal them?"

"Trade with unsuspecting customers?" Hiccup ventured, then corrected himself immediately, his voice sobering. "No; that would be an act of war."

"Do you really think..." She couldn't finish the question. Hiccup brought his left hand up, feeling for her. She took the hand and held it to her cheek, stiff cloth against smooth skin.

"I think we need to be prepared," Hiccup said quietly.

They both started when the stairs creaked. Valka stood in the doorway, bearing a tray that held two steaming bowls. She placed it carefully on the floor, then approached the bed to grip her son's shoulder.

"Gustav brought some fish for Toothless," she said, "and Gobber wishes for you to recover quickly: he's already weary of answering questions." At the sound of his name, Toothless stood and stretched, leaving the room in search of the mentioned fish. Valka continued to stand there, her face unreadable, as if she was trying to make a decision. Finally she stood straight and turned toward the door.

"Good- Goodnight to you both."

"Will you come back tomorrow, Mom?" Hiccup asked.

"I will, son," she promised, then she was gone, the front door creaking behind her.

When she had left, Hiccup wrinkled his nose. "What's that smell?"

"I think she made some...broth?" Astrid guessed. "That was kind of her. You should eat something."

"Um, how?" he inquired. "I can't even see what it is, how am I supposed to eat it?"

"I'll help you, silly," she responded, reaching down and carefully lifting one of the bowls.

It was awkward: he couldn't see the spoon, and she occasionally forgot to warn him. After she had wiped up spilled broth for the third time, Hiccup huffed in frustration and, raising his hand, made to lift the bandage over his eyes.

"No." She stopped him with her hand on his wrist. "You're not ready for that yet."

He exhaled through his nose, impatience evident, but obeyed. She resumed the spoon-feeding, and the silence once again lengthened between them.

"Astrid," he asked at last, between spoonfuls, "how long will this last? The bandages, I mean."

"I don't know," she said guardedly. "Gothi probably knows, but she hasn't told us anything about it."

"Well, pray Odin this heals quickly," he said, "because until it does, I can't see to put my foot back on, I can't see to fly Toothless, I can't see you or Erling -"

"Speaking of," she interjected, hearing a cry from the ground floor. She descended the stairs quickly and carried Erling up, shushing and soothing him as she walked.

"Here," she said, nestling him in the crook of Hiccup's elbow. Erling continued to cry, tiny fists flailing. "I don't know why he won't stop," she said, struggling to make her voice heard.

Hiccup rocked Erling with his arm and the sobs slowly subsided, diminishing in volume and intensity until they ended in disconsolate sniffles. Astrid took him back and laid him in his crib, humming quietly to forestall any more screaming.

"Maybe he understands," said Hiccup, "maybe he knows that we might be in trouble."

* * *

><p>That night, Astrid dreamt of flying again, but it wasn't as she remembered.<p>

The water stretched uninterrupted as far as she could see, and the wind buffeted her from every direction, threatening to blow her off her dragon if she once loosened her hold. When she reached down to touch Stormfly for reassurance, it wasn't the Nadder she was riding. It was a massive Changewing, its eyes glowing like their gem-stone eggs, its maw opening wide to scream, acid welling in its throat to consume her. She cried out in terror and let go, falling, spinning out of control, no one to see, no one to rescue her.

Just before she hit the waves, she opened her eyes with a jolt...

4. Chapter 4

**A/N: As you've probably guessed by now, this story draws on a

number of plot points drawn from DreamWorks Dragons: Riders of Berk and Defenders of Berk. While I endeavor to write just enough back-story to make the connections clear, if you haven't seen the TV series you may find yourself occasionally confused. So if you haven't seen the show, you should watch it. It's very funny, surprisingly good, and features a lovely through-line of Hiccup growing up, bonding with his dad, and learning to be a leader. It also introduces Dagur the Deranged, the most sophisticated and interesting villain in the HTTYD movie-verse.**

* * *

><p>Chapter 4:<p>

"You have got to be kidding me," Tuffnut grumbled, looking up from his meal as an unmistakable figure slouched its way through the Great Hall, heading straight for the lanky twin and sliding onto the bench beside him.

"Hey, Tuffnut?" Snotlout began, his tone halfway between growl and whine.

"The answer's no," Tuffnut cut him off, turning to face the wall with his arms folded.

"You didn't even hear the question!" Snotlout's voice was rising in pitch, the obnoxious whine drowning out the ineffectual growl.

Tuffnut was not to be persuaded. "I am not giving my sister a message from you. Ever. Again."

"Look, Tuff," Snotlout said, changing tack, "how was I to know Ruffnut would react like that?"

"Well, whatever you wrote, she didn't like it," Fishlegs interjected, joining the conversation abruptly. "Maybe you should try apologizing."

"Nobody asked you, Fishhead," Snotlout grunted, scowling.

"Where is Ruffnut, by the way?" Fishlegs asked, ignoring him.

"Probably trying to bury somebody."

Blank stares met this pronouncement.

"I don't know," Tuffnut added shortly, "and if I did, I wouldn't tell either of you."

"Hey, hey," Fishlegs protested, "first of all, I'm not the one sending your sister offensive messages. Second, I'm just trying to be friendly. And third, I don't think I need to remind you that I am completely over Ruffnut." After counting each point on his fingers, Fishlegs sat down with a smug expression on his face.

"Don't you have work to do, Fishlegs?" Snotlout asked sarcastically, trying to edge his way around the much larger man.

"Oh yes," Fishlegs squeaked, his face more smug than ever. "Since it's the end of the Dragon Racing season, there are some important lessons about speed and maneuverability that this year's riders need to work on. Which reminds me that I'd better go or I'll be late. See you guys later!"

Fishlegs lumbered out of the room, nose in the air and exaggerated swagger in his step.

"What did he mean, he's over Ruffnut?" Snotlout inquired, suspicious.

"Oh, didn't you know?" asked Tuffnut, cheering up slightly. "He's been seeing the Svenson girl."

"What, that chubby, cross-eyed spinster? What was her name, Girth? Girt?"

"Her name is Gerd."

"Huh," Snotlout wondered, "who knew?"

* * *

><p>Unbeknownst to Tuffnut, Snotlout, and Fishlegs, Ruffnut was at that very moment using something other than her brother as a punching bag. She was in a rage, raining down blows on a well-groomed stuffed yak between sudden outbursts of wild, ranting fury. Eret watched without interfering, listening to her disjointed story and waiting for her temper to subside. They knew each other well enough that he knew it eventually would, and when it did, they could talk reasonably, or at least as reasonably as Ruffnut could manage. When she had finally beaten the stuffed yak into frazzled submission, he stood to face her, patting her shoulder gently.<p>

"What did you do then?" he asked, encouraging her to continue the story that was causing so much consternation.

"I...I took his note and I went home and asked my parents, and they said it's true, the _mundr_'s already been paid, and all that needs to be done is hold the stupid ceremony and move in to the stupid ancestral family home." Ruffnut's declaration came out in a rush between gritted teeth. She sniffed angrily and rubbed her nose with one hand. "But I won't marry him! I'll die a spinster first, or take after Gothi and become village elder," she finished, lower lip quivering.

"There's no need to be dramatic, Ruff," he chided wryly, "I don't think Berk would survive you as elder."

She frowned again, her mood worsening. He softened his tone immediately.

"Don't worry," he consoled her. "We'll get this sorted out; I'll speak to Hiccup."

"And why would he listen to you?" she asked, suspicious.

"Because I think I can persuade him to keep that guy away from you," he assured her. "And you won't have to marry him, Ruff." He took a

deep breath before continuing. "Because I am going to marry you."

She looked up at him, frowning in shock and surprise. "What did you say?" she asked quietly.

"I'm going to marry you, Ruffnut," he repeated earnestly, "if you'll have me?"

She looked down at the ground, scuffing her boot on the floor and chewing her lip. She'd given up on Eret, son of Eret, as a potential husband months before, but she still liked him. She liked him very much. She liked him much better than any other man in Berk. Impulsively, she hugged him tightly, cracking a smile and nodding against his broad shoulder. "Took you forever to ask," she said, pulling away and punching him lightly.

"Took you forever to stop flirting with every other boy in the village," he returned.

She didn't even blink. "It's not that easy to get a husband around here," she offered as paltry explanation. "But you'd better go talk to my parents, and Hiccup, tomorrow and no later."

"I will, don't you worry," he said, wrapping his arms around her again. "And I've been doing some planning of my own. Everything will work out just fine."

She laid her head on his broad shoulder, for the first time in her life enjoying the safety of his strong embrace.

* * *

><p>Astrid climbed the stairs slowly, her arms laden with clean bandages, clothing, and Erling's diapering cloths. When she reached the top she stopped, her face darkening.<p>

"What are you doing?" she asked, addressing her husband.

He was sitting on the edge of the bed, right foot on the floor, hands desperately feeling for his metal foot. Toothless was getting in his way, scrabbling to keep his head under Hiccup's hand.

"I am not spending another day in this blasted bed," he gritted out, teeth clenched. "Toothless, bud, you've got to stop that." Toothless just tried harder, plopping his head down on Hiccup's lap and refusing to budge. "Astrid, a little help here?" he pleaded. "Please?"

Astrid sighed in exasperation, setting the washing down and reaching for his prosthetic. She set it in his outstretched hands, taking care not to jostle the left one.

"Toothless, do you mind?" Hiccup said, patting the dragon's head with his bandaged hand.

With a disgruntled huff, Toothless retreated to the floor, where he sniffed Hiccup's bare toes.

It took Hiccup much longer than usual to attach the foot. His wounded

left hand was too thickly bandaged to manipulate the delicate buckles and cuff mechanism, so he had to use his slightly clumsier right hand. And he put it on backwards the first time, causing Toothless to growl until the problem was corrected. When it had finally been fitted into its proper place, Hiccup stood, slowly, leaning on Toothless' head for support. Astrid watched as he took a tentative step, hands feeling before him, then another, and another, and then -

Thunk, as he tripped on the cradle. He went down in an ungainly heap, inhaling sharply as his injured hand hit the cradle's hard edge. Toothless poked at Hiccup's shoulder with his nose, pushing his rider to get up and try again.

"It's okay, bud," Hiccup reassured him. "We'll keep trying."

He stood again, placing one hand on the wall, the other on Toothless. He made it three more steps, before his metal foot caught on an uneven board in the floor and he crumpled. Toothless lowed mournfully as Astrid stepped in, giving Hiccup her arm and helping him to a seat.

"As if learning to walk again wasn't bad enough the first time," he said quietly, "I now seem to have an obstacle course inside my own house."

"Well, you've never been one to do things by halves," she replied. "You always go overboard when it comes to accidents."

"Wasn't trying to," he grunted, then raised his hand, trying to lift the bandage over his eyes. Astrid caught his hand in hers, twining her fingers with his.

"Hey. We'll get through this, babe," she said, "like we always do. Together."

He nodded, squeezing her hand once. They spent the remainder of the morning, and some of the afternoon, in a constantly repeating cycle of walking, falling, getting up and walking, and falling again.

* * *

><p>The next morning, the third since the accident, Hiccup made it all the way down the stairs, letting Astrid lead him to the table, Toothless right behind. They sat there, sharing breakfast, Hiccup doing his best to feed himself and not entirely succeeding, but not failing either, so Astrid let him continue. She held her head in her hands; Erling had been awake and crying multiple times that night, unusual for him. She felt sluggish and tired, her mind slow to process. They talked quietly of this and that, unimportant things. But an unspoken question lay between them; that Hiccup was up meant that a decision had to be made, and soon. Toothless sat on the floor, wiggling his haunches, almost giddy with impatience, if a dragon could be giddy.<p>

When the conversation had seemingly ground to a halt, Hiccup laid his knife down slowly and asked, "Has the rest of the village been told what happened?"

Astrid sat up straighter. "No," she replied. "Fishlegs hasn't had any

trouble at the Academy, and Gobber's been taking village-related questions at the smithy," she explained, "but I think we should say something today." She took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "You need more time...to heal."

A pause. "I suppose that would be best," he said slowly. "In the meantime, I guess you're stuck with...all this." He gestured vaguely, taking in bandaged head and hand along with everything else.

"It would appear so." She stood, gathering the clay plates and wooden mugs to clear them away. Hiccup reached out and caught her by the wrist, sliding his thumb along her forearm.

"Are you all right, Astrid?" he asked, concern edging his voice. "You seem a little out of sorts this morning."

"Now why would you say that?"

He shrugged his shoulders in that bouncy way she loved. "You haven't punched me yet."

"I'm just tired," she said quietly, unable to rise to his gentle bait. "I'll be fine."

* * *

><p>They stood outside on the doorstep, Hiccup, Toothless beside him, Valka, Gobber, Fishlegs, and Astrid, who held Erling. The sky was grey, the clouds pregnant with the promise of autumn rain. The villagers gathered slowly on the hill, scythes and baskets in hand, some of them muttering among themselves. Astrid eyed the sky, hoping the weather would hold until the harvest was finished. When the crowd had gathered, Gobber held his hand and hammer in the air, calling for silence.<p>

"Now, some o' ye know this a'ready, so we'll make this brief," he cried, his voice echoing over the village. "A few days ago, there was an incident involvin' some wild dragons, and the chief was injured."

There was a collective gasp from the crowd, but Gobber continued.

"As ye can see," he said, laying his hand on Hiccup's shoulder, "he's all right, but 'e needs some time off. So, you lot, if ye 'ave a question concerning the village, ye ask me. If it's a question about the dragons, ye ask Fishlegs or Valka. Anythin' else, ye ask Gothi. Understood?"

There were murmurs of agreement from the crowd. "All right, then," Gobber concluded. "Back to work with ye!"

Slowly the villagers dispersed, some to the docks, some to the arena and stables, most to the fields. A few lingered however: a tall, solidly-built young man separated himself from the press of villagers and approached confidently.

"Eret's coming," Astrid whispered in Hiccup's ear. He nodded slightly.

"Hiccup," he said without preamble, "I need your consent for a piece of land."

"Eh, laddie, ye 'eard what I said," Gobber warned.

"Yes," Eret replied. "I also heard you say that I would have to ask the chief about that land. That's what I'm doing."

"It's fine, Gobber," Hiccup interjected, stepping slightly forward and raising a hand. "Now, Eret, what piece of land did you have in mind, and why?"

"The promontory above the dragon stables," Eret answered boldly. "I wish to build a house, because very soon it is my intention to marry."

Gobber stared, dumbfounded. Astrid was herself somewhat taken aback by his boldness. But Hiccup took it in stride, his hand absently reaching out to stroke Toothless.

"And who, might I ask, is the lucky young lady?" he asked in a neutral tone.

"Ruffnut Thorston," Eret replied, head held high.

Fishlegs squeaked in surprise and departed in a hurry. "Well, I've got some things to do; I'll talk to you guys later," he called over his massive, and rapidly retreating, shoulder.

"The lad's right," Gobber added, his peg-leg already carrying him down the hill, "I should get back ta the smithy." Valka remained, her hand on Hiccup's shoulder, supporting him.

"You might not know this yet," Hiccup said, "but I believe another clan already has an arrangement with the Thorstons. And I can't just give you the land without -"

"But that's not what Ruffnut wants," Eret contested hotly. He couldn't see Hiccup's eyes under the bandage; the chief's casual tone was making him nervous, but he held his ground.

Hiccup thought for a few moments, chin in his hand. When he spoke, the words were not at all what Astrid expected. "I can't mediate any argument without the Thorstons present," he said finally, "and we're in the midst of harvest, so even if you can pay the surety on the land you won't be building anything for a while, Eret." He paused and took a deep breath. "Come to me after the harvest: I'll give you my decision then. And raise the mundr, because without it I can't decide in your favor."

Astrid squeezed Hiccup's hand encouragingly as Eret trudged away, his head held high despite the folly of his actions. It was not only an insult, but also a breach of propriety to approach a woman who had already been claimed. It was no wonder Gobber and Fishlegs had left so abruptly. "What are you going to tell him when he comes back for your decision?" she asked.

"I have no idea," he admitted with a shrug. "Much as I like Eret and want to favor his request, I can't overlook precedent or overturn a previous claim on a whim. It all depends on money."

"I hate that tradition," Astrid scowled. "Eret's a farmer working other men's land; how can he even hope to raise a bride price right now? Or purchase land of his own?"

"I don't know, Astrid, but I have to make a fair decision, one that's not based on how I feel about the matter. Tradition is a big part of that, and money for marriage is part of our tradition."

Astrid bit back a sharp reply, resisting the urge to ask Hiccup how much he and his father had paid for her. That they had made their claim on her well in advance of the wedding had finally ended Snotlout's clumsy flirting and given her some peace, for which she had been grateful. But though the bride price existed for the admirable reasons of protection and economic balance, more than one woman in the village had found herself married to a suitor of her family's choosing, and some families chose the highest bidder without thought of compatibility or inclination. Love matches were rare, and for girls from poor families they were almost unheard of. Astrid lifted her eyes to the heavens, thanking the gods that she had married someone she loved, and offering up a silent prayer on Eret and Ruffnut's behalf.

* * *

><p>Far away across the leagues of open sea, Dagur surveyed the open cages filled with twelve glowing Changewing eggs and chuckled softly. "Revenge is sweet, isn't it, Hiccup?" he said to himself. "Especially when you have no idea where it's coming from."<p>

His eyes narrowed in his round face. "Leave the cages open until the dragons come," he barked. "There can be no mistakes: I want at least one full-grown dragon for every egg in my possession!"

Casting one final glance over the fruit of his labors, he walked away, his swagger exaggerated to grotesque proportions. "A storm's coming, Hiccup," he muttered, "you'd better be ready."

5. Chapter 5

****Review Replies:****

****Jo (Guest):** I have heard your requests for more frequent updates, and here is my answer: I would love to update every day, because I'm proud of this story and I can't wait to share each and every chapter with you. But while I pace myself with each update, I'm working on the sequel, _Revealed_, which I hope to finish and begin publishing as soon as _Hidden_ concludes. ******

****Quarter (Guest):** I'm glad you like it, and more is indeed coming. ******

****Guest:** Keep reading; it gets better. ******

* * *

><p>Chapter 5:<p>

Rain lashed at the shutters as the wind howled down from the hills,

both elements relentlessly seeking entrance. After two weeks of frenzied, back-breaking work under lowering skies, the harvest was in and the weather had turned foul that very day. The rains of autumn were upon them, and while they lasted, most of the villagers would stay indoors as much as possible.

Hiccup had been in and out of the house in the two weeks while he recovered, walking the village, attending to more and more of his duties, his head and eyes bandaged and always with Toothless as his guide. The Night Fury, for his part, had somewhat reluctantly submitted to taking his daily flights with Valka, Eret, even Fishlegs and his students. Astrid, constantly busy with caring for her husband and son, had insisted on the arrangement and for once Hiccup had respected her wishes, promising to remain on the ground until the bandage came off for good. What would happen after that Astrid had no desire to think about.

As rain dripped from the eaves in a monotonous rhythm, Astrid rocked her babe gently, willing him to calm down and sleep. Erling had been fussy and fractious, not like his usual self, for two weeks straight, and Astrid was near the end of her patience with him. When she could take it no longer, she rose abruptly, spreading a lamb-skin on the floor, and laid her son down on his back. Erling only screamed louder.

"It's your turn to try, Toothless," she said, exasperated. The dragon looked at her for a moment, then padded forward to nuzzle the baby with his nose. Erling quieted a little, reaching up to touch the dragon's face. Before long, he was playing quietly, Toothless patting him lightly with his forelegs and rolling him with gentle nudges.

"No licking, it doesn't wash out," Astrid warned sternly as she saw Toothless' tongue sneaking out. Hearing her, the dragon closed his mouth, an almost guilty look on his face.

"Are you using my dragon as a babysitter?" Hiccup asked lightly, one corner of his mouth tugging upward in a smile.

"What's yours is mine," she quipped, sitting down next to him. "And he seems to be better at it than you or me."

They had long since finished supper, the evening passing quietly, but for the noise of wind and rain and Erling's almost constant crying. Hiccup took her right hand in his left, the newly-healed skin pink in the candle-light, and rubbed it lightly.

"What did you and Toothless do today?" she asked.

"You mean, besides dodging the rain and getting the rest of the harvest in? The Ericksons had their baby named today; they decided to call him Leif. Unusual name, isn't it?"

"Yes," she replied. "What about your meeting with Eret and the Thorstons?"

He huffed in irritation. "Oh, that. Eret doesn't have the money; he brought everything he's saved from the past two years and offered to sell everything he has, but it's still not enough. And I tried to tell Ruffnut, gently, but she just got mad at me and said it isn't

fair that - "

He stopped, his cheeks flushing slightly.

"What?" she prodded.

"That I married you, and Fishlegs is seeing someone he likes, and everybody's ganging up to force her to marry somebody she can't stand," he finished quietly. "And then the Thorstons objected to Eret because he's not one of their relations and they suspect he might be of 'dubious parentage'. As if marrying one's cousins over and over again is a great way to develop the family blood-line."

"Hiccup, that's what most families do," she argued, "or they negotiate with other tribes." His lips pressed together and she softened a bit. "Would it help if I talked to Ruffnut?" she offered.

"It might," he sighed. "At least, it can't do any harm. Don't let her give you a black eye like the last time."

"I'll be careful," she promised with a grin. Ruffnut was her closest friend outside of her family, and she could hold her own against the tempermental twin.

"Well, after the Thorstons objected, Eret took offense and everything dissolved into pointless arguing; the decision had to be postponed, again. I warned Ruffnut, and her parents, and Eret, that I'm giving the final word tomorrow, and if anybody else protests after that, they'll regret it."

She leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said simply.

"They just don't listen, any of them," Hiccup concluded. "What would my dad have done? How would he have handled the situation."

The question was rhetorical, and there was no answer. She waited a moment before changing the subject, reaching up to finger the bandage around his head. "We should do it now."

"Are you sure?" he asked.

She noted the slight quickening in his breathing, the way he sat up a bit straighter.

"Gothi said to do it today. And in this weather, we won't be interrupted," she responded. "At the very least, it might take your mind off all the problems that are revolving around Ruffnut right now."

He inhaled, slowly, then exhaled and nodded his head, just once. Setting the candle closer, she reached up with steady hands, unwinding the bandage and inspecting what lay beneath. His hair was growing back in, most of it jutting out in unruly tufts or lying flat in squashed patches. She was pleased to see that repeated ministrations of Gothi's ointment had done their work. There was new skin on his forehead and cheeks, pink and shiny, but healed. The scars would fade with time. His beard had grown in the intervening weeks. She frowned; that would have to be dealt with, and soon.

Taking his face between her hands, she looked straight into his clouded eyes.

"Blink," she said.

He did, once, twice, thrice, the movement of his eyelids normal. "Now what?" he asked.

She took a deep breath. "Can you see anything? Any light? Shapes? Colors?"

"No," he said slowly.

She lifted the candle, holding it close to his face and passing it back and forth before his eyes. The light reflected off his milky pupils and he made no response, neither squinting nor blinking to dispel the brightness. The once bright orbs glistened wetly, as if weeping of their own accord, mourning their loss. Without them, Hiccup's world was well and truly darkened.

"Astrid, am I blind?"

She touched her forehead to his, tears unaccountably blurring her vision. "I'm sorry," she murmured again.

He raised his hands, mirroring her hold on his head, and kissed her. He missed at first, and she had to guide his mouth to hers, searching for him, hungry for his taste. They held each other tightly, and when they broke apart to breathe, she laid her head on his shoulder. He chuckled softly.

"That was the saltiest kiss I've ever had," he said.

"It was kind of awkward too," she replied, then her face sobered. "Hiccup, what are we going to do?" she asked.

"Hey, hey," he soothed. "Everything will work out, you'll see. Right, bud?" he asked, as Toothless ambled over and nudged him. Astrid's heart fluttered in her breast.

The dragon crooned softly in response, and Erling began to cry again, missing his playmate. Astrid lifted him in her arms and resumed her seat next to Hiccup. They sat there quietly, husband, wife, son, and dragon, while the autumn clouds wept from the darkening sky and the wind moaned around the walls.

* * *

><p>In the Mead Hall, Ruffnut picked at her fish morosely and listened to the spatter of the rain on the rooftop. Snotlout sat opposite her, equally sullen, measuring the rapidly diminishing contents of his ale-mug from time to time. Around them, other villagers chatted quietly as they shared their evening meal. Ordinarily, the end of harvest would be celebrated with a feast, but between the coming of the rain and the mood-dampening implications of Hiccup's injury, no one was in the mood to celebrate.<p>

At long last, Ruffnut pushed her plate aside with an exasperated huff, folded her arms on the table in front of her, and proceeded to stare Snotlout down. He was not to be baited however, calmly lifting

his mug to finish the last few drops of ale. Setting the mug down without making eye contact, he wiped his mouth with the back of a hand, then reached across the table to touch her fingers. The action produced the desired effect. She withdrew stiffly, breaking her stare and turning away from him, arms folded over her chest.

"Look, Ruff," Snotlout began in a conciliatory tone, "I'm sorry about the note. That probably wasn't the best way to tell you the news." Ignoring her pointed silence, he continued. "I like you, Ruff. I want to marry you. But I want you to be happy with it."

She snorted. "Why don't you try leaving me alone?" she suggested.

Tuffnut joined them then, standing behind his sister and mirroring her posture.

"Hey, Ruff, can I help you beat this guy up?" he asked.

"Tuffnut, my old friend," Snotlout cried, standing up and attempting to shake Tuffnut's hand. Tuffnut batted the proffered hand away.

"We are not friends," he said flatly.

"But we were once and we could be again," Snotlout said, his voice uncharacteristically persuasive. "Come on, Tuff, you're going to be my brother-in-law soon. Why not get the pleasantries out of the way now?"

Tuffnut stared at him coldly for a few seconds. Then, tugging at his twin's arm and preparing to leave, he turned to face Snotlout one final time. "You just wait until tomorrow, Snotlout, when Hiccup makes his decision."

"I don't know why you're so upset," Snotlout shouted after the twins' retreating figures. "It's not you who's getting married. And besides, your parents want it this way." He looked around to find every face in the Mead Hall turned toward him. "What?"

* * *

><p>It was grey twilight, the only sign of morning the change in the air that happened just before the sun rose. The rain had poured steadily through the night, but toward morning it had slackened to a light drizzle and the wind had dropped. Hiccup sat up quietly in bed. Beside him, he could hear Astrid, her breathing deep and steady. Erling, too, was sleeping.<p>

So far, so good.

Reaching to his left, he grasped his prosthesis, bending and strapping it on with practiced care. His movements, quiet as they were, woke Toothless, who raised his head and silently watched his rider's clandestine preparations.

Within a few minutes, Hiccup stood, ready to leave; Toothless rose, gliding down off his stone perch with the silent grace of a cat, and dragon and rider descended the stairs together, Hiccup orienting himself with a hand on the wall. They approached the front door, treading lightly. Hiccup pulled it open, praying the hinge wouldn't

creak. It did. Hiccup froze, breath held, but no sound came from the bedroom. Opening the door wide to let Toothless out, Hiccup followed, closing the door behind him as softly as he could manage.

"Come on, bud," he whispered once outside, "they can't make us stay down any longer. Just a short one, okay?"

Toothless purred happily, and they slipped away through the drizzle.

* * *

><p>A few hours after sunrise, Valka started at the loud knocking at her door. Fearing trouble, she pulled it open hurriedly, to find a much-dishevelled Astrid holding a fur-wrapped and lustily howling Erling on her door-step.<p>

"He's gone," she said, stepping inside. Valka couldn't help but notice the dark circles under Astrid's eyes. "Hiccup's gone; I can't find him, or Toothless. I think they've gone flying."

"Have ye told anyone else?" Valka asked evenly, donning her boots and a thick mantle against the drizzle.

"No, I just came from the house," Astrid said. "And I overslept this morning...I don't know how long he's been gone or what direction they went."

"We should fetch Gobber," Valka suggested. "He can organize a search party to cover the island while riders search in the air."

"Eret should go," Astrid said as they made for the smithy. "Skullcrusher's the best tracker we have. And Stormfly can keep up with him, easily."

Valka stopped walking, grasping at the implications. "Astrid, no," she said solemnly.

Astrid kept walking, her gaze fixed straight ahead. Valka ran a little to catch up.

"Ye shouldn't go, Astrid, it's been over a year," she said, vainly attempting to convince her daughter-in-law.

"You were the one encouraging me to fly not so long ago." Astrid's shoulders were set, stubbornly. "I didn't want to stop flying," she added more quietly. "It was a mistake to give it up then, and it would be a mistake for me to stay down now." There was a pause and she shifted Erling to the other hip. "Hiccup is missing, I am going to find him." She stopped and looked Valka in the eye, softening a little. "Will you keep Erling for me? Please?"

Valka sighed with resignation and nodded, taking the baby and resuming her walk to the smithy, while Astrid sped off to find Eret and Stormfly.

Ten minutes later, both dragons were saddled and waiting, Eret already mounted on Skullcrusher. Astrid stroked Stormfly's neck gently.

"Hey girl," she whispered, "I've missed you."

Stormfly nuzzled her shoulder, cooing in response.

"I'll take good care of her, Brenna," Astrid said, climbing into the saddle. The younger girl smiled encouragingly.

"You'll be fine, both of you," she said. "Just don't let her preen too much. And find them quickly."

"We will," Eret replied. "Skullcrusher, let's go."

Unfurling their wings, the dragons soared into the air, the ground dropping away rapidly beneath them. Astrid held her face to the wind, eyes closed and mouth half open in a small smile, her stomach giving the once familiar lurch at the old sensation.

"I've missed this," she yelled, the wind catching her words and tearing them away as soon as she spoke.

Ahead of her, Eret smiled, looking back over his shoulder to watch her. Her hair was blowing loose from her hasty braid and her fur hood flapped in the wind. He laughed lightly, spurring Skullcrusher on, and both dragons sped onward through the grey drizzle.

They flew on, Skullcrusher never changing course or direction, until a small, grey island appeared through the misty rain, an inland forest dark against the monotonous grey of stone. The dragons began to descend, heading for a long stretch of beach that grew larger as they approached.

"What?" Astrid murmured, puzzlement in her voice. "Why would they come here?"

Eret heard her question, but made no response, for he was as mystified as she.

The dragons landed quickly, heavy talons digging into the sand for purchase. Before Stormfly had folded her wings, Astrid was out of the saddle and running across the sand to the dark figures who sat almost at the water's edge. Eret followed more slowly.

Hiccup sat on the shore, one hand on Toothless' head, the other tracing unidentifiable patterns in the wet sand. Astrid slowed as she approached, willing herself to be calm.

"What are you doing, Hiccup?" she asked when she reached him.

He turned his head toward her, unseeing eyes searching ceaselessly.

"Toothless brought us here," he said simply. "Although, I don't actually know where here is." Toothless warbled mournfully and nuzzled his rider's elbow.

"It's Changewing Island," Eret said, joining them.

Hiccup's head turned toward the newcomer. "Skullcrusher," he said quietly. "I should have known."

"You should have known better, Hiccup," Astrid said, her tone stern.

"I kept my promise, Astrid: I didn't try to fly until the bandages were gone."

"You know what I meant," she snapped at him. "And you didn't tell anyone you were leaving; what did you expect me to think?"

He didn't answer the question, but asked one of his own. "What about your promise, Astrid? You shouldn't be here either when you promised to stay on the ground."

"That is not what this is about!" she snapped.

Eret closed the distance between them and put a hand on her shoulder, stopping the incipient quarrel. "We should leave," he advised, "before the Changewings find us here."

Hiccup pursed his lips and let a frustrated huff. "That could be a bit of a problem."

"Why?" Astrid asked.

In answer, he stood, and Astrid growled in frustration. The stirrup that connected Hiccup's metal foot to Toothless' leather tailfin was a mess, mangled and bent almost beyond recognition and certainly beyond functionality.

"I - I must have put it on badly," Hiccup admitted, "and we had a bit of a rough landing when we got here."

"Can it be repaired?" Eret asked, kneeling down to inspect the damage and stroking Toothless reassuringly.

"Not here," Hiccup replied. "But there should be enough slack in the connecting line to jury-rig it."

"How?" Astrid asked, her tone still sharp.

Hiccup explained carefully, laying out instructions in concise tones. While Astrid, Stormfly, and Skullcrusher watched for Changewings, Eret worked quickly, cutting, twisting, bending, shaping, and tying knots until a temporary stirrup was in place, the line just barely slack enough for the necessary give. He stood, rubbing his hands and inspecting his work.

"It won't hold forever, but it should hold until we get back to Berk," he said. He hesitated a bit, watching Hiccup's face carefully. "I don't think you should fly with Toothless, Hiccup."

Hiccup nodded grimly and laid his hand reassuringly on Toothless' head. "Will you ride him, Eret?"

They mounted and Toothless yowled, shaking his head and refusing to budge.

"Toothless, what's wrong?" Hiccup asked, concern in his voice.

In response, Toothless turned his head and pointed inland.

"I don't think he wants to leave just yet," Astrid said. "Unlike the rest of us," she added somewhat tartly.

Hiccup ignored her, jumping down from Stormfly to kneel in front of the Night Fury. "Toothless, come on, we can't stay. It was a mistake to come here."

Toothless cooed plaintively, nuzzling Hiccup's face and shoulders. Hiccup put his arms around the dragon's neck. "Trust me, bud. Let's go home."

He stood, Astrid giving him her hand to climb back up behind her, and all three dragons rose into the air, Eret doing his best with the improvised stirrup. Once again, Skullcrusher led the way back.

As they flew, Astrid kept her jaw set in a grim line, even as Hiccup embraced her from behind, his hands around her slender waist. So distracted was she, she almost missed the dark outlines gliding along the surface of the water below. Hiccup felt her muscles tense under his arms.

"What is it?" he whispered, his breath warm on her ear.

"Ships," she replied, "dozens of them. Berserker ships; and they're headed towards Berk."

"That's bad," he said. "Fly higher, we don't want to be seen."

They rose into the clouds, Toothless and Eret gamely working to keep up, and made their best speed back to the island. Had they flown lower, they might have noticed the clouds of steam that drifted upward from the ships at the center of the armada.

6. Chapter 6

A/N: Many apologies for the delay in posting this chapter: school takes top priority right now.

* * *

><p>Chapter 6:<p>

Berk hove slowly into view, its clustered houses and crowded docks a cheering sight after leagues of choppy grey sea. They set down in the village square, a crowd already gathered to meet them. Before any of the assembled villagers could question him, Hiccup spoke, commanding their attention with his voice though he could not see them.

"Listen to me," he shouted, quieting the murmuring crowd. "There are Berserker ships headed this way, and we have to be ready to meet them. Is Gothi here?"

The crowd parted to make way for the ancient elder. Approaching the chief, she laid her hand on his arm.

"Gothi, I need you to take the children and elders to the Great Hall. Keep them safe, all right?"

She patted his arm lightly in acknowledgment, then made her way back through the crowd, a small herd of Terrible Terrors tumbling along in her wake.

Hiccup began to issue orders in a quick, terse voice, directing some to the docks, some to the cliffs above the village, still others to the granaries and armory.

"We'll do our best to prevent a war," he concluded, "but if war is what they want, then war is what they'll get. All right, let's go."

The crowd dispersed, everyone moving with purposeful hurry, each to the allotted task or position. Hiccup was left in the square with Astrid, Valka, Gobber, Eret, Fishlegs and his students, Snotlout, and the twins. Astrid took the sleeping Erling from her mother-in-law, thanking Valka quietly as she did so and noting that Eret had moved to stand much closer to Ruffnut; Snotlout was eyeing the two of them suspiciously, but wisely kept his mouth shut. Fishlegs stepped forward, his students huddled together behind him.

"What do you want us to do?" he asked, his voice firm and steady.

"Get every able-bodied dragon rider into position," Hiccup replied. "I want dragons covering every area of the village. Ruff, Tuff: you and Snotlout get the Terrors and patrol the coast and perimeter. Mom, I need you and Cloudjumper at the docks; if they have any wild dragons with them, you two are our best hope of stopping them. Eret and Skullcrusher can go with you. Fishlegs, take your students to the summit: you guys are our backup if things go south. Are the aqueducts filled?"

"I checked 'em this morning," Gobber answered. "Full and ready for anythin'. And the rain should keep 'em that way."

As Hiccup spoke, Toothless had been insistently nudging his hand, leg, side, any part of Hiccup that he could reach. Hiccup, for his part, had done his best to keep the dragon still and quiet, rubbing his neck, scratching his chin, pressing firmly on his nose, and finally wrapping both arms around his head to hold him still. When Gobber spoke, Hiccup turned his head toward the blacksmith, a look of relief on his face.

"Gobber, Toothless' saddle needs some repair," he said. "Go down to the smithy and get the forge hot. We'll be down shortly."

Gobber nodded, hobbling away on his truncated limbs toward the edge of the cliff, his head held high and a jaunty tune on his lips. If there was anything the hefty blacksmith liked better than a pint or two, it was the prospect of a good fight.

Valka approached her son as the others left. Kneeling down, she laid one hand on Toothless' nose, the other on Hiccup's shoulder.

"Hiccup, what is this about?" she asked, her voice low. "You're a peace-keeper; why are we preparing for war?"

Hiccup waited a moment before answering, Toothless' rumbling purr

filling his ears. "Remember that day, Mom, the day I took the students to Changewing Island? There were men on the island, attacking the Changewings or stealing the eggs; I don't know which, but whatever they were doing, the dragons were angry enough to attack us uncamouflaged. The Berserkers are coming, in force, and we have no way of knowing that they aren't armed with wild Changewing hatchlings. We can't risk not being prepared."

By this time Astrid had joined them, standing between them and listening attentively.

"We could fly out to them," Valka suggested. "If we meet them before they reach us, we could prevent both war and the destruction of our homes."

"Or we could miss them entirely in this rain and return after a fruitless search to find our village destroyed," Hiccup returned quickly. "And if we did manage to find them, the sight of a defensive force mounted on dragons could precipitate conflict. No, we wait here, we let Dagur or whoever's in charge make the first move. If he wants to parley, we'll parley. But if it's a fight he wants, we'll give it to him."

"You're wrong, son," Valka said, standing. "But I'll do as ye ask."

Hiccup stood and Astrid joined him as he turned in the direction of the forge. They walked together, Erling sleeping in his mother's arms and Toothless waddling beside Hiccup on four legs.

"And what are you going to do, Hiccup, when Dagur and his minions get here?" she asked finally.

"Me? Toothless and I will either lead the charge or be the first to sit at the negotiating table. Either way, I know what you're going to say, and my answer is no."

Astrid said it anyway, plunging recklessly forward in her concern. "Do you really think, after this morning, you can handle Toothless in a battle?"

"I'm hoping I won't have to," he replied, his voice grim. She looked at him then, his jaw set in a firm line, his eyes directed straight ahead and his expression unreadable.

"If you do have to, please don't ride alone," she said, a note of plea in her voice. Her hand was on his arm, holding tightly. "Let me fly with you. Let me be your eyes."

"I don't need eyes to fly, Astrid."

"Yes, but what if something happens? What if Toothless loses his tail and you can't see to know what's wrong? Please, Hiccup."

He stopped walking abruptly. He was thinking, she knew, his mouth working slowly before he made any reply. Toothless looked up at them, his gaze moving steadily between Hiccup and Astrid.

"What about Erling?" Hiccup asked at last.

"He can stay with the other children," she replied. "Maybe being around other little ones will get him to stop crying for a while," she added with a small smile.

He laughed. "That might be a minor miracle."

"Like the one we're going to need if the Berserkers have Changewings with them?" she asked, serious again.

"We don't know that they do."

"But you think they do."

They had reached the forge, Gobber's hammer beating a welcoming tattoo from within. Toothless crawled through the entryway, wings folded and legs bunched under him in the cramped space. The blacksmith greeted him loudly, his voice rising above the cacophony of iron on iron, his tone as cheery as it would be on any other day.

"I don't know what's going to happen, Astrid," Hiccup said quietly. "Dagur has a long score to settle, and he's crafty. He's not coming to sign a peace treaty, and he's not coming unprepared. Things are going to get hot and ugly very soon."

"We'll follow you," she promised, "all of us. But you and Toothless have to lead us aright."

"Find me later," he replied, striding forward into the forge.

"I will."

"And Astrid?"

She stopped, looking at him.

"I'm sorry...about this morning."

She reached up to caress his cheek. "I'm sorry too."

He smiled, stroking her hand. "I guess we're even now."

"Yes."

Astrid left then, hurrying to catch up with the group headed for the Great Hall. Nobody was going to destroy their home again, not if she had anything to say about it.

* * *

><p>They waited the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, moving about only when necessary and speaking in hushed tones, if they spoke at all. The villagers were on edge, tensed and ready to face whatever came, ready to defend their homes and families to the death if need be. The Berserkers were old enemies, Dagur's treachery the subject of many an object lesson at the Dragon Academy, and not a man or woman in the village held out much hope that there wouldn't be a fight. Many of them relished the coming conflict. So they waited, until the sky grew dark as the sun set behind the clouds. Lanterns

were lit, their lights kept shuttered as night fell and the island was covered in a shroud of darkness, the moon and stars hidden.<p>

Astrid sat next to Toothless on the edge of the cliff, her beloved axe strapped on her back and Hiccup on the dragon's other side. They spoke quietly, Astrid describing everything she saw. Patrolling dragon riders shone their lanterns as they passed, the winking lights a signal agreed upon long ago. Every signal made Astrid breathe a little easier, hour after hour passing without sign of the ships or other intruders. Toothless eventually slept between them, his breathing a comforting rumble in the darkness.

She glanced across at her husband. He sat very still, face shadowed by the helmet resting on his head, left hand loosely grasping the fire-sword in his lap.

"Hiccup," Astrid ventured after a few moments of silence, "your mother was right: why are we just waiting for something to happen?"

He was silent for a moment before answering. "Do you remember what happened the last time Dagur tried to invade?"

"He kidnapped your dad and you had to team up with Alvin to beat him."

"Yeah, and I was almost frantic then trying to rescue dad and keep Dagur away from Toothless. What can I do if Dagur tries again? If he takes Mom? Or you? Especially after...what happened. I'm always in the dark now."

Astrid bowed her head. "Everything will be fine," she whispered, not really believing it herself. "And right now it sounds like Dagur is the least of your worries."

He snorted in sarcastic agreement. "It's too much all at once, Astrid. Where do we go from here? How do we move on? And if we are about to be attacked by Berserkers, I don't know that we'll win."

But Astrid was barely listening, her attention riveted on something far out at sea. It was a light, flickering and faint, but there. And probably headed in their direction.

"Hiccup," she said, her voice urgent, "there's something out there."

He stood, his hand on Toothless' neck. The dragon was immediately alert, his eyes glowing orbs in the darkness. "What do you see?" Hiccup asked breathlessly.

"A light...out on the sea." She was standing now. "It's flickering...I think it might be fire." Her breathing quickened with sudden realization. "It's torch-light. Hiccup, they're coming."

* * *

><p>It was utter chaos when they came. The Changewings - mature adults in hunting groups of two and three - descended on Berk

shrieking, roaring, spitting acid and burning everything they could reach. The village was painted in fierce shades of red, orange, and yellow, green acid sizzling hotly and the angry flames of torches licking hungrily at wood and melting the pillars of ice.<p>

Dragon riders rose as one to meet them, fighting acid with fire. The attacking dragons came in a wild and undisciplined rush, maddened and vicious but without a leader or direction. They met concerted defense on the ground and in the sky, seasoned warriors fighting alongside young riders, the dragons fighting just as hard to protect their homes. Together they kept the Changewings in the air, where they couldn't change their skin and remained both visible and vulnerable to counter-attack. The first onslaught was beaten back, the Changewings withdrawing to lick their wounds before charging again.

Astrid rode behind Hiccup, arms tight around his torso as they flew, keeping a constant stream of words flowing in his ears, relating everything she saw. She watched the edges of the firelight warily, alert to another possible attack. Below them on the ground, women and teens fought fires and pulled wounded men and dragons to shelter. Hiccup shifted his foot and Toothless banked, drawing closer to the perimeter where the defensive torches burned brightly.

"Are they still there?" Hiccup asked, his voice hoarse from shouted orders.

"Yes," she replied, "beyond the sea stacks. They look like they're waiting for something."

"Waiting? They're wild, why would they wait?"

"I don't know, Hiccup, but they're not attacking and they're not flying away. They're just circling, keeping their distance."

"That's not good," he muttered.

Toothless raised his head and growled. Astrid felt the sudden tension as his muscles shifted beneath her, and they dropped altitude, dipping below the edge of the cliff to skim the water. It was dark around the docks, with no moonlight to glint on the water and no torches. Hiccup leaned forward, hand on the dragon's head.

"What is it, bud?" he asked quietly. Toothless tossed his head, ears flat and wings spread in a glide. "Toothless, search!" Hiccup commanded, his voice quiet but urgent.

The dragon loosed a plasma blast, purple light spreading over the dark water and revealing the shapes of ships, too many and too close, their sails emblazoned with a fierce totem and decks crowded with men.

"Berserkers!" Astrid hissed in Hiccup's ear and he reacted instantly.

"Toothless, up!" he cried, shifting his foot, and they rose swiftly, cresting the cliff in a rush. Hiccup began shouting orders again, calling out over the moans of the wounded and the ring of unsheathed blades, the villagers scrambling into position.

"Riders in the air!" he shouted. "Ground fighters, I want three groups positioned in front of the cliff approach."

"Hiccup, what about the docks?" Valka called, she and Cloudjumper flanking them. They had joined the village defenses for the first assault.

"We can't defend the docks from dragons and Berserkers. We'll have to face them up here. Eret, Snotlout, Ruff and Tuff, formation behind me."

The riders rose into the air, adopting a formation just before the next wave of dragons hit.

The battle was joined, fiercer and deadlier than before, the Changewings more wary and thus more dangerous, shots of hot acid streaking through the darkness. The dragon riders struggled to keep them in the air, desperately fearing the consequences of failure. Hiccup and Toothless flew clumsily, their trust in each other complete, but their movements slowed by disability and lack of practice. Astrid clung to Hiccup for dear life as they soared and swooped, diving, spinning, banking, tumbling, and firing shot after shot of plasma into the horde of shrieking dragons. Below them, the Berserkers had reached the top of the cliff, roaring, charging, and meeting determined resistance, axemen, lancers, and archers layered in interlocking rings of defense. Gobber had dragged his beloved catapult Bessy to the cliff to happily fire stone after stone into the oncoming hordes, yelling and singing and roaring with laughter.

The men, women, and dragons of Berk fought long and hard, firelight glinting off their blades and shining in their eyes as they struggled together. But they were hopelessly outnumbered and it began to show, the ground defenses slowly pushed back as wave after wave of fresh Berserkers gained the summit and surged forward. Almost too late, Hiccup realized the danger and called the retreat, landing with Toothless and regrouping his fighters in the village square, setting dragon riders circling above. Astrid noted the gaps in the ranks with a pang of sorrow.

The Berserkers paused in the fray, their ranks parting to make way for a short figure in elaborate leather armor and horned helmet, his face and arms tattooed with stripes. He swaggered into the square with an arrogance born of supreme confidence and approached the chief.

"Hiccup, old friend," he called in greeting, his voice echoing in the square.

Hiccup skipped the pleasantries. "What do you want, Dagur, and why have you attacked us?" he growled.

"Oh, you know very well what I want," Dagur replied. "You've gotten in my way once too often, and what I couldn't win by subtlety I'll take by force. Give me the Night Fury and we can all go home."

"No!" There was ice in Hiccup's voice. "You will have nothing of ours; you will take your men and your dragons, and leave Berk, or I will drive you off the cliff myself."

A ragged cheer went up from the crowd behind him, his people exhausted but resolving to fight on.

Dagur's face darkened. "I warned you, Hiccup," he spat. "I tried to play nice. Now you'll deal with the consequences."

"And so will you," Hiccup countered, mounting Toothless as the Berserkers prepared for a final assault on the beleaguered villagers.

They lifted into the sky, Astrid once again holding tight. As they joined the dragons circling above, resuming formation, she set her chin on his shoulder and lifted his helmet to kiss his cheek.

"If this is it, babe," she whispered in his ear, "you know I love you, right?"

He turned his head to nuzzle her cheek. "This _isn't _it," he replied, "but I do know, and I love you too."

Toothless growled beneath them, a deep bass rumble that made his saddle vibrate.

"And I love you, bud," Hiccup said, leaning forward to stroke him. Astrid pulled him back suddenly, shrieking in alarm.

The boulder came out of nowhere, striking Astrid in the side and knocking her loose. She slid, grabbing and clawing for something to hold, and fell to the hard-packed dirt below, Hiccup's cry echoing above her. She landed on her left side, wrist twisted painfully beneath her and all the breath knocked out of her lungs. Fighting for air, she dimly registered rough hands lifting and carrying her away. She kicked feebly, trying to reach her axe, but the hands were too strong, twisting her injured wrist until she cried out in pain.

Far above in the dark sky flames blossomed, and she heard the shouts and curses of men around her as if from a distance, her vision blurring at the edges. There was an arm over her throat, cutting off her windpipe; she struggled and kicked harder, desperate for air, but it was too late. She surrendered to flickering dark, and the blackness took her.

7. Chapter 7

**Review Replies: **

Jesusfreak (Guest): That would be telling, wouldn't it?

**Quarter (Guest): While it's hard to see your favorite characters suffer, there is no drama without conflict. Besides, suffering makes the resolution sweeter. And I'm glad you like this story. **

**Jo (Guest): I don't know where Dagur gets all of his soldiers, but he always has lots of them around. Do keep reading, because this is not over quickly. **

* * *

><p>Chapter 7:<p>

When Astrid opened her eyes, she was disoriented and confused, her vision blurry and entire body aching. She tried to sit up and immediately regretted it as the action sent crashing waves of pain through her head. She lay still, breathing until the pain and nausea passed, then tried again more slowly, with better success.

She took stock of her surroundings: she was lying next to a round, wooden pillar in a small space crowded with barrels, boxes, and coils of rope, all of it dimly lit by a single lantern swinging from a beam above. The hold of a ship, she deduced, and then the realization struck: she was no longer in Berk, therefore she was a prisoner. Instinctively, she reached for her axe, but it was long gone.

Frowning, she felt herself gingerly for injuries. Her side was bruised and sore from her fall, but it would heal. She was more concerned for her left wrist; it was wrapped tightly and braced with something stiff and straight, and it throbbed dully. Sprained or broken, she decided. That would make escaping difficult.

She stood carefully, breathing with each movement and feeling her legs adjust to the rolling of the sea. Footsteps and muffled voices drifted down through the ceiling, and she moved cautiously, wary of making a sound. As she quietly stepped around the mast that dominated the hold, she nearly tripped on something soft, stifling a cry. Leaning down, she examined the obstacle in the dim light.

It was a booted foot, or rather a pair of them, attached to legs, a torso, and a head that she recognized.

"Eret," she whispered, kneeling to shake him gently. He groaned and his eyelids fluttered. Astrid noted the blood in his dark hair, her fingers brushing gently over a long cut just above his ear. Slowly he opened his eyes, looking up at her with a bewildered expression on his face. She put a finger to her lips.

"Don't move too much yet," she murmured. "I think we're prisoners, and you're injured."

"Wha- how- the battle? Did we win?" His brow furrowed in pained confusion.

"I don't know," she replied, "I fell off of Toothless, and I think I blacked out after that. Can you sit up?"

He nodded slowly, and she put her uninjured wrist behind his shoulder, helping him rise. He slumped forward a little, head on his chest, breathing raggedly, and she steadied him. When he was upright, she examined the wound on his head. It was long but not deep, and his skull felt firm beneath the ragged skin. She breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that it wasn't fractured. They sat in companionable silence then, Eret leaning his head back on a barrel, until the lantern went out and plunged them into murky half-light. There was a small porthole, little more than a hole in the wood, just under the ceiling; through it, Astrid could see a patch of dismal grey cloud and nothing else.

The rocking of the ship and muffled splash of the waves was beginning

to lull her to sleep when a hatch opened above them and a Berserker stuck his head into the hold. Seeing them both sitting up, he withdrew, and within seconds Dagur himself descended to their prison, holding a lantern above his head.

"Well, well, well, what have we here?" he asked lightly.
"It's...Astrid, isn't it? Hiccup's woman?"

She lifted her chin defiantly. "I am his wife, and if you lay so much as a finger on me, Hiccup will make you eat it," she threatened.

He chuckled in response. "Hiccup is in no position to do any such thing," he warned, "and you are in no position to make threats."

"You have no quarrel with her," Eret spoke up. "Leave her alone."

Dagur turned to him, his face darkening. "And you...traitor. Do you have any idea what's in store for you?" He went on, his voice menacing. "There isn't a punishment painful enough for the likes of you."

"You could kill me now and save yourself some trouble," Eret muttered.

Quick as lightning, Dagur's sword was in his hand, the point at Eret's neck. He glared back up at his aggressor, tired eyes blazing with challenge. Dagur responded in kind, leering in Eret's face and inching the blade forward until a tiny spurt of blood trickled down his neck. Eret held his ground, unblinking, until Dagur seemed to think better of killing him and drew back, wiping the blood from his sword-point and sheathing it with a very nasty smile.

"Not today," he drawled, as if nothing had passed between them. "But I'll let you think about it." He turned and climbed back up the steps to the deck, glancing over his shoulder to fire a parting shot. "Sit tight, my friends. Dagur's got you safe and sound."

When he was gone, Astrid turned to her companion. "What was that all about?" she asked, concerned. "And why did he call you traitor?"

"It doesn't matter," Eret answered wearily, leaning his head back again. "It's just words; they don't mean anything."

Astrid sat next to him, puzzling it over in her mind until she did fall asleep, exhaustion finally overcoming her curiosity.

* * *

><p>Regret is a bitter dish, Hiccup reflected sorrowfully as he walked the village, Toothless by his side. They had won the battle, saved at the last moment by a fearless and utterly reckless charge on the part of Fishlegs and his students: Dagur and his men had been forced to retreat to the boats and take to the sea, Changewings following in the air. But the celebration would be slow in coming. The cost of the battle - in men, dragons, and property - had been high, too high. Around him, the villagers worked quickly, tending the wounded, bringing food and water, fighting fires until they died to smoldering ash and embers. All spoke quietly, words of comfort,

solace, and shared sorrow passing between them. Hiccup listened, trying to gauge the emotions of his people, finding sorrow, regret, bitterness, and anger to match his own. Astrid's voice was not among them.<p>

Toothless lowed softly as they walked, attuned to the depths of human feeling, his wings raised as if to protect his rider. Hiccup stroked him gently, comforting and consoling.

"I know, bud. I know," he murmured, his voice hoarse from smoke inhalation and exhaustion. He'd lost his helmet at some point during the battle, and he ran a hand through his uneven hair, sightless eyes watering against the stinging smoke that lingered in the air.

They flew to the stables together, numbed and exhausted by recent events but mindful of their responsibilities. Hiccup still felt unsure of himself, alone and in the dark - quite literally, he reflected - and suddenly reliant on hearing, touch, and smell. Toothless guided him as well as he could, communicating with his voice and body. But deep as their bond was, there were some things that could not be communicated without words. It would take time to learn, time they apparently didn't have.

Fishlegs, Gobber, and Valka were already in the stable tending the injured dragons, their voices harried as they worked. But there were others as well, Tuffnut and Snotlout arguing in raised voices, younger riders calling to each other across the wide space, and above all else, dragons lowing, yowling, trilling, growling, and shrieking until the whole space was a cacophony of sounds.

Toothless raised himself on his back legs, opening his jaws and roaring. The noise died down momentarily, humans and dragons looking up as chief and alpha strode into the arena. Hiccup, unseeing, ignored most of them, allowing Toothless to lead him to his mother and her helpers.

Valka stood, tossing her long braids behind her shoulders and wiping her hands on the canvas apron she wore. She watched as her son approached, his short hair standing up in unruly tufts, his scarred face tired and streaked with soot. She reached out her hand, touching his arm when he reached her, and he spoke, his face and voice apprehensive.

"What's the damage, Mom?" he asked.

She kept her voice even when she answered. "Torn wings, broken limbs, gashes, damaged eyes... They hit us hard, Hiccup. It will be a long time before most of these dragons recover. And there are a few who won't see dawn tomorrow."

Toothless growled, smelling blood and hurt and sickness, and Hiccup tensed. The dragon stepped away, carefully approaching a young Nadder that lay on its side, breathing shallowly, badly injured. Toothless nuzzled the Nadder's horn, earning a faint trill in response, and then moved on, approaching each dragon in turn to offer whatever form of comfort or reassurance a dragon could. He stopped on the far side of the arena and crouched before a Zippleback, one of its twin heads alert and upright, the other lying immobile on the stone, its neck wrapped in bandages and eyes closed. A Terrible Terror waddled over to sniff inquisitively at the bandage, but Toothless shooed it away

with a growl and went back to sniffing the Zippleback's head.

It was Barf. Ruffnut sat next to her dragon, her face blank, not even listening as Tuffnut and Snotlout carried on the interrupted argument. Valka led Hiccup to where they stood, and he raised his voice, silencing them both mid-sentence.

"Guys, what is going on here?" he asked, his voice sharp with authority.

Snotlout spoke first. "Hey, me and Hookfang stayed in formation this time, so it is not my fault his stupid dragon got hurt, and no, we are not going out to look for that guy on our own!"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," Tuffnut cut him off. "First of all, it's not my dragon. Secondly, I can't go on search and rescue: Barf's grounded, and if Barf's grounded, Ruffnut's grounded, and if Ruffnut's grounded, I'm grounded, and if I'm grounded-

"Wait, what's wrong with Barf, and what is all this about search and rescue?"

Snotlout opened his mouth to respond, but Ruffnut spoke up from the ground.

"Barf's hurt," she said quietly. "A Berserker got him... And Eret's gone."

"Eret? I thought he was helping down at the docks."

"Nobody's seen him since last night," Fishlegs commented, joining the little group. "He might have been captured."

"Well then, Fishlegs, we'll organize a search party," Hiccup responded. "If he's on the island we'll find him, and if he's been captured, we'll probably hear from Dagur about it."

"Hiccup, there's something else you should know," Ruffnut said, anxiety and exhaustion uncharacteristically clouding her voice. "Astrid's gone too: the Berserkers took her."

Hiccup didn't respond; he simply stood as the world crashed down around him. There had been so many demands on him after the battle that he hadn't had time to search for her, merely trusting that she was helping somewhere in the village and would find him when she could. That was how Astrid always did things.

Gone?

He sank to the ground and ran a hand through his hair again. When he spoke, his voice rang hard as iron.

"We send off our dead, tend our wounded, rebuild what we can, and fortify ourselves against further attacks." He took a deep breath before continuing. "But I need able-bodied dragon riders with me. We're going after them, and we're not coming back until she's safe. Understood?"

"Fine," Snotlout muttered darkly, "just as long as everybody knows it wasn't my fault."

* * *

><p>It was brighter when Astrid woke. She stood slowly and made her way to the small porthole, climbing up to look through it. The sky had cleared somewhat and she could see the sun going down, its last rays shining into the hold. They were sailing south, she realized, storing the information away to be used later. She climbed back down, nearly falling over when she tripped on a small box on the floor. It held biscuits, fish, and water; clearly Dagur was smart enough to treat his prisoners well.<p>

She lifted the box awkwardly with one hand and carried it over to where Eret sat, still sleeping, and woke him, frowning slightly when she had to shake him more than once. He woke slowly, groaning. Astrid's eyes narrowed but she said nothing, handing him food and convincing him to eat by doing so herself.

They ate slowly, sharing the jug and conversing quietly. Astrid used a bit of water to clean Eret's cuts, escaping droplets sliding down his jaw and neck. They were neither of them in any condition to escape, but Astrid shared what she'd learned from her glance through the porthole and they speculated as to how far they were from Berk and what islands might be closest. There was no doubt in Astrid's mind as to their destination, but she had no intention of getting there.

"What changed your mind about Ruffnut?" she asked out of the blue, changing the subject.

"What do you mean?"

"Two years ago, you couldn't stand her, then for a while you ignored her; now all of a sudden, you say you're going to marry her. What brought that about?"

His eyes were dark. "I've seen animals suffer at the hands of men, but I won't see her suffer with a husband she doesn't want."

"So you'd put yourself forward as the alternative?" she asked. "Don't you think that's a bit risky?"

He shrugged. "Ruffnut doesn't ask me to be anything other than what I am, a farmer. And she respects me, I think."

Astrid wasn't sure about that, but she held her peace. "Well, if you do marry her," she cautioned, "you'd better have a thick skin, 'cause she's not one to mince around with her opinions."

"I noticed," he replied. "She made her opinion of Snotlout quite clear."

She looked up, confused. "Snotlout?"

"Yes." He seemed surprised. "I thought you knew: it's the Jorgensons who have a claim on her."

That complicated things; no wonder Hiccup had been so frustrated with the whole situation. His uncle Spitelout was a vocal and influential member of the village council and as chief, Hiccup had to avoid

stepping on toes. And Spitelout had probably paid the Thorstons a very high bride price. Astrid's heart suddenly went out to both Eret and Ruffnut, pitying the impossible situation in which they found themselves.

"Your tribe has a history with Dagur and his Berserkers," Eret observed quietly, unwilling to dwell further on the previous topic.

"That's putting it mildly," she replied. "But we used to be at peace."

"What happened?"

"You heard what he said to Hiccup? He's been saying that ever since he found out we train dragons instead of killing them; he won't rest until he's turned Toothless' skull into a helmet."

Eret raised an eyebrow. "That figures," he said.

Astrid cocked her head. "What do you mean?"

"Should be obvious," he replied. "Night Furies are rare: any sane chief would avoid them, but anybody who calls himself Deranged would pursue them. They're a symbol of prowess."

"Hmm." Astrid pondered his answer; Eret's prior occupation gave him a knowledge of people and dragons that differed significantly from her own.

"So, when do we go begin planning our escape?" he asked, changing the subject.

"As soon as you can stand upright without wobbling," she replied. "You're concussed, did you know?"

"Is that why my head still hurts?" he asked with a grimace.

She nodded, and a contemplative silence fell between them, the fish and biscuits gone, the light fading as the sun went down.

A sudden knocking and flood of lantern light heralded an arrival. It was Dagur, as smug as before but with an indefinable edge, resentment or anger darkening his face. Small as he was, he filled the space, menace rolling off his presence. Astrid had to give him credit: he knew how to make an entrance, and he put that skill to good use.

"Good evening, jail-birds," he greeted. "I trust that your accommodations are adequate?"

Astrid rolled her eyes. "I've heard that one before, Dagur."

"Still feisty, are we? You should thank me, Astrid: I could have you and your... friend...bound for the duration."

Astrid noticed the pause, but ignored it. "So why don't you?"

"What would be the point? I have you here, injured, unarmed, with myself and Captain Vorg for company, and several days sailing with

nothing but Berserk ships for miles around."

Several days could mean anything. She filed the information away as Dagur continued to pontificate.

"You have nowhere to go, no way to call for help, and no means of escape. Isn't that right, _Eret_?"

Startled, Astrid turned toward her companion. He was avoiding eye contact with both of them, his face carefully blank. He gave no answer and Astrid paused, suddenly unsure of herself. Dagur grinned wickedly, a look that would've made Astrid squirm...if she wasn't Astrid.

"So, now that we've established the way things are," Dagur continued, "let's talk about the way things are going to be. You, Astrid, are going to train my Changewings for me."

"No I won't," Astrid snapped.

"Oh, come on, it's not as if I asked you to kiss my boots or anything, although you could. No, all you have to do is train a few Changewings, and then I'll let you go back to your little island paradise."

"And what makes you think I even know how to train a Changewing?" Astrid asked. "I'm just a dragon rider; Hiccup's the one who trains all the dragons."

"Oh, if I know Hiccup, and I do," he countered, "I wouldn't be surprised if every last stupid Viking in Berk knows how to train dragons."

"I've heard that one before too, Dagur. Didn't Alvin tell you how many times he tried to get Hiccup to train dragons for him?"

"Alvin was an idiot," Dagur almost shrieked. "Don't you ever compare me to Alvin! Alvin's ideas didn't work and mine do!"

But Astrid's temper was rising too. She jumped up, fearless, and shoved her nose as close to Dagur as she could get. It wasn't hard, as they were of a similar height. "Not as well as you think, Dagur!" she yelled in his face. "Now listen, and listen good: I am not going to train dragons for you, now or ever, and you'd better start thinking about what you're gonna' do when Hiccup comes to rescue us, because I promise you, he will."

Dagur almost backed away in the face of her wrath; almost. But he'd stood down chieftains, barbarians, and pirates who vastly dwarfed him, and he wasn't about to show weakness before a captive woman.

"We'll see about that!" he snapped, then stormed out of the hold.

Astrid sat down, breathing hard, then turned to her companion. "How does he know your name?" she asked without preamble.

A flush crept up his neck, then onto his cheeks, and he avoided her gaze. She was dangerous when roused, and he knew it. "I sold dragons

to a lot of people, Astrid," he said finally.

"Even Berserkers?" she questioned.

"Maybe," he replied, clearly reluctant to discuss the subject further. "Look, you should get some sleep while you can. Dagur's gonna' be pressuring you until you give in or he gives up, both of which could take a while. You need all your strength."

She didn't answer, but stared at him for a moment before moving away to make herself comfortable on a pile of folded canvas, lips pressed together. Eret was holding out on her, she knew it, but she couldn't pressure him for the answer. He'd tell her sooner or later. And he was right: Dagur would be relentless until she caved to his whim.

8. Chapter 8

****Review Replies:****

****Jo (Guest):** I'm sure Dagur would conquer the world if he could; that seems the kind of thing someone who calls himself Deranged would do. And I'm glad you're enjoying Eret's role in this story.

****Fault (Guest):** Thanks for your kind words, and I'm very pleased that you like it. Do keep reading: the situation with Eret will be expounded upon in upcoming chapters. ******

* * *

><p>Chapter 8:<p>

It took longer than Hiccup had ever thought possible to organize repair crews, search parties, and village defense. There were endless demands and questions, at the forge, the stables, the arena, in the Great Hall, even on his own doorstep when he and Toothless finally retreated home late that night for a few hours' rest; his mother had insisted that both of them sleep before setting out the next morning. The house seemed empty, quiet, and cold, the fire long since burned to ash and Erling safe with Astrid's mother. Hiccup tossed and turned in his bed, exhausted but restless, disturbed by visions of pain and flames and deadly searing heat, the war chants of mail-clad Berserkers and the shrieks of enraged Changewings, Astrid's wrenching cry as she fell, and the burning and melting agony of boiling acid eating through skin to dig and tear at nerve and muscle and bone

-

Hiccup sat bolt upright, shaking, left hand instinctively pressing into his forehead and blood drumming through his veins. Toothless raised his head and trilled questioningly.

Hiccup breathed deeply, willing his heart to slow down its frantic rhythm. "It's okay, bud, I'm all right," he said, his voice uncharacteristically shaky.

Toothless huffed quietly, as if unconvinced, but laid his head back down, raising his one remaining tailfin to cover his face.

Hiccup copied him, lying down and focusing all his efforts on breathing evenly, counting every exhalation and waiting for sleep to descend. It was maddening, with no difference whether he closed his eyes or not, and only Toothless' breathing to disturb the deathly quiet in the house. Despite his exhaustion, sleep eluded him, hovering on the edge of awareness, tantalizing, yet tinged with the ever-present threat of nightmare.

After two hours of futility, he sat up again, rousing Toothless with a whisper and bending to attach his prosthetic. He sat back up again with a pang of bitter memory.

"Be safe," she'd said and he'd promised. "We'll get through this," she'd assured him, and he'd taken comfort from her words. But he'd come home from Changewing Island blinded and despite his best efforts to drive the Berserkers away, Berk was in shambles. And Astrid was gone, taken, and it was his fault.

"Astrid, forgive me," he murmured, eyes squeezed shut and Toothless nudging his knee. "Come on, bud. I need to think and I can't do it in here."

Ten minutes later saw them seated on the cliffs that towered high above the village, the early morning breeze ruffling Hiccup's hair and carrying the mingled scents of smoke and salt to his nostrils. The sky was clear, a young moon shining feebly on the shore and glittering on the swells of the sea far below. The sea stacks cast deep shadows, their feet shrouded in darkness. Hiccup sat with his legs dangling off the cliff, breathing in the chill air and thinking out loud.

"Dagur has Astrid," he mused, "and he probably has Eret as well. If he's headed back to Berserk Island, it will be at least three days before the armada gets there, and another four or five before he demands an exchange. But if he has bargaining power, why would he head home in the first place?"

Toothless trilled softly in response, his warm exhalations ruffling Hiccup's hair. That Dagur's ships were completely gone had been ascertained the day before, Gunnar reporting that the beaches on every side of the island, as well as the sea for several leagues around, were clear. But Hiccup wasn't convinced that Dagur was done with Berk.

"Unless he has some crazy scheme to make Astrid do something for him."

Toothless studied his rider's face: there was something not quite right in his voice, not sickness but anxiety or exhaustion, and Toothless could smell his fear. Mate and hatchling were gone, which wasn't right. Toothless liked mate and hatchling; he felt their absence in the lack of their scents, colors missing from a palette of comfort and familiarity. He nuzzled Hiccup with his head, purring in an effort to comfort him, and Hiccup scratched his chin absently, his thoughts still on Dagur's schemes.

"And if Dagur was stealing Changewing eggs, which I have no doubt he was, what did he do with them? Because those Changewings certainly weren't hatchlings."

Hiccup paused, something stirring in his memory.

"Eggs...hatchlings..." His eyes widened as sudden realization hit him, and he smacked his forehead with one of his hands. "Oh no, Toothless: Alvin and the caves! Mildew must have told Dagur all about Alvin and the Whispering Death eggs."

He rose quickly and climbed back into the saddle. "Come on, bud, we have to find Gobber right now."

* * *

><p>Gobber was at the forge, Toothless finding him through some combination of instinct and familiarity; Hiccup was grateful that flying blind was getting easier. He climbed off of Toothless and hopped inside, feeling the heat of the fire on his face as Gobber began his day.<p>

"Gobber," he all but shouted, breathless, "I need your help."

"Easy there, Hiccup, I'm righ' 'ere and there's no need to be shoutin' and wakin' the whole village this early," he replied, unperturbed. "What's the trouble?"

"Do you remember when we had all that trouble with Whispering Death hatchlings and the Screaming Death?"

"Remember? Huh, do I ever! Those things caused more trouble than _you_ ever did!"

"Yeah, well we got rid of them," Hiccup reminded him. "But they left all those tunnels under the village, and I'm not sure that we found all the exit holes. I need you to take as many helpers as you can and search every inch of those tunnels."

"Whoa, slow down, Hiccup," Gobber cried, stopping Hiccup in his urgent babble of words. "First of all, you asked me to lead a search party for that dragon-trappin' boy. And second, wha' exactly am I lookin' for in all those tunnels?"

"One question at a time, Gobber," he replied. "There's no need to search for Eret; I think I already know where he is. And when you search the tunnels, you're looking for eggs."

"Eggs?"

"Eggs." Hiccup nodded and went on. "Changewing eggs. Remember, 'stones of good fortune'?"

"Oh, those pesky buggers? Thought we'd seen the last o' them."

"I hope we have." Hiccup reached out a hand, feeling for the bench Gobber normally kept shoved against a wall. Gobber took his wrist and led him to it, both sitting and Gobber looking into Hiccup's face expectantly.

"There's something you need to know," Hiccup said quietly, "something I didn't tell anyone but Astrid, and told the Dragon Riders to keep to themselves."

Gobber waited, listening intently as Hiccup went on.

"The day...this...happened," he said, pointing to his dead eyes, "I saw men on Changewing Island. I don't know who they were or what they were doing, but if my suspicions are correct, they were Berserkers, and they were stealing eggs."

"Is that why they hit us with wild Changewings? Because your mum though' somethin' like that mighta' happened."

"If Dagur's learned anything from being allied with Alvin, he'll have known about the Whispering Death eggs and the tunnels. He may be trying it again."

Gobber shifted, cupping his chin in his good hand. "Hiccup, what do we do if we find them? Valka won' let me destroy 'em."

"I don't know; sink them in the ocean, take them back to their mothers, just get them off of Berk before they hatch or more Changewings try to take them back."

"All righ', lad," Gobber said, nodding. "I'll do as ye ask, an' you find that wife o' yours, though I'll wager a cask o' mead she's already givin' Dagur a hard time."

Hiccup forced a smile, hoping with all his being that Astrid wasn't causing too much trouble. "Thanks, Gobber," he said, rising and leaving. "Just keep Berk in one piece, okay?"

"Will do, Hiccup, don' you worry."

* * *

><p>The third day passed in much the same way as the previous two, stretches of fitful sleep interspersed with periods of bored restlessness and impatient pacing. During one of the latter, Astrid scrutinized every inch of the hold they occupied, taking stock of what it contained.<p>

Sailcloth, enough for potential repairs. Rope, and plenty of it; that could be useful. Innumerable crates and boxes; Astrid slowly and painfully pried the top off of one of them, careful not to jar her broken wrist. It contained leather armor, all of it too large for her and too small for Eret. In a dark corner she found a nest of baby rats that squeaked sleepily up at her. After that discovery, she stomped grumpily back to her seat, evaluating, scheming, and planning.

They had the rope, but the portholes were too small to squeeze through, and even if they could get out, they'd be left dangling over open sea with nowhere to go. Astrid didn't need the sound of increased activity overhead to tell her the ship was crowded with Berserk warriors. Even uninjured, there was no way she and Eret could face all of them and hope to escape or take over.

She slumped down on her pile of sailcloth and wrapped her arms around her knees. Eret regarded her quizzically from where he sat leaning against a stack of barrels. She looked back at him, frowning at something that jogged her memory.

"You've been to Berserk Island?" she asked without preamble.

His answer was guarded when it came. "Yes. Long ago." He leaned forward, hands clasped in front of him.

"What do you know about Dagur?"

He took a deep breath. "He wasn't chief when I knew him. He was a kid, but just as Deranged as he is now."

"So you must've known Oswald the Agreeable?" she continued, pushing him for information. "I didn't know he was the type who would actually buy dragons."

"Well, he didn't," Eret answered, avoiding her eyes, "but there were plenty of others willing to pay for captured dragons. I didn't ask what they did with them."

"Wait...if you had an agreement with the Berserkers, how did you end up working for Drago?"

Before he could answer, a sudden flood of daylight announced the arrival of Dagur himself, followed by Captain Vorg. Dagur looked harried, his helmet askew and his eyes already narrowed dangerously. He marched over to where Astrid sat and grabbed her arm roughly, dragging her to her feet and pushing her up the stairs to the deck. Captain Vorg did the same to Eret.

Astrid stood on deck, blinking in the light. The sun was out, and reflecting blindingly off the water and the tall, rocky outline of an island. Astrid frowned again, recognition filling her with dread. It wasn't Berserk Island, it was -

"We've arrived," Dagur growled, still holding her arm and issuing rapid orders to the crew. As they disembarked, Astrid looked around and her heart sank. Of all the ships she had seen attacking Berk, there were only two remaining, the others presumably having been sent elsewhere under the command of a deputy. That would make any potential pursuit much more difficult.

They headed inland, Dagur, Vorg, a few other guards, and the prisoners, all of them treading lightly and constantly alert for danger. The island wasn't large, but it was a long march that finally ended in a natural cave deep in the woods. Astrid and Eret were herded to the back, where they were forced to sit while two guards stood over them. Dagur and Vorg stayed near the front of the cave, the latter building a fire and opening a satchel of food. They ate in watchful silence, Dagur stealing a vaguely threatening glance over at his prisoners from time to time.

Night fell, and from within the cave they heard the shrieks, growls, and gurgling cries of wild dragons settling in for the night. Astrid sat with her back against Eret's, fighting back long-delayed tears as she thought of her husband and child. She leaned her head forward, her lips moving silently as she prayed to every god in Asgard to keep Hiccup and Erling safe.

* * *

><p>They left at dawn, Hiccup, Snotlout, Fishlegs, Gustav, and Gunnar comprising the search party. Hiccup had been against taking students

with them, but Fishlegs had argued that since speed was essential, Fanghook and Wildwing were among the best dragons for the job. Hiccup had refrained from pointing out that if speed really was essential, Meatlug was perhaps best left behind; he needed Fishlegs on the journey, and couldn't afford to offend him. So he ignored his inclination to take Skullcrusher, hoping to rely on instinct and experience where they lacked tracking capabilities.<p>

They took to the skies, leaving Valka, Brenna, and Ingmar to look after the dragons and Gobber in charge of the village.

Fishlegs led the party south, Meatlug setting a steady pace. The others fanned out behind him in formation, flanking and providing cover in case of potential attack. They rode the updrafts off the sea, soaring and gliding and never losing sight of the water. As they flew, they kept a conversation going, planning for any eventuality.

Gustav Larson, the eldest of Fishlegs' students and nearly finished with Dragon Training, kept watch with his Nightmare Fanghook, constantly scanning the sea for signs of Berserker ships and by times throwing a sarcastic comment in Snotlout's direction. Gunnar, quiet and much subdued by the events of recent weeks, listened carefully to every word the others spoke, not saying much himself. Astride Meatlug, Fishlegs carefully studied the map of the archipelago, reacquainting himself with the geography that lay between Berk and Berserk Island. Snotlout kept up a running argument with everyone within earshot, including Hookfang, who snorted and growled and flamed whenever his rider went out of line. Hiccup, from his position behind and to the right of Fishlegs, focused on locating his companions by sound, trusting Toothless to keep the other dragons in formation.

They flew on, league upon league of empty ocean swallowed up behind them, until the sky darkened with dusk and they set down on a small island to wait out the night. They sat around the flickering campfire, leaning their backs against the dragons and talking quietly.

"How much farther do you think, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked.

Fishlegs studied the map spread out before him. "According to my calculations, we're about two days flight from Berserk Island; if we keep up our best speed, we should catch Dagur on the open sea."

"I could fall asleep on our best speed," Snotlout interrupted. "Besides, what if Dagur isn't headed for Berserk Island?"

There was a pause. "Why would he head anywhere else?" Gunnar finally asked. "He has hostages, so he must know the chief's following him; it makes sense for him to retreat to his own territory so he can bargain on his own terms."

"Since when has Dagur done what makes sense?" Snotlout scoffed, lounging against Hookfang's side and picking his teeth with a fishbone.

"Since never, kinda' like someone else I could name," Gustav muttered, helmet tipped over his eyes and hands folded behind his head as a pillow.

Hiccup lifted his head, feeling the warmth of the fire on his face and regretting leaving Skullcrusher behind. "I think you might be on to something, Snotlout," he said. "Yes, Gunnar, Dagur will want to negotiate on his own terms, but he also has a horde of wild dragons with him and no way to keep them from destroying his own villages. Fishlegs, what's between here and Berserk Island?"

Fishlegs scanned the map again. "Uh, you're not gonna' like it, Hiccup," he said hesitatingly.

"Tell me anyway."

"Well, there are some random uninhabited chunks of rock, one of which has apparently been renamed Snot-land." Fishlegs fingered the untidy scrawl on the otherwise neatly lettered map and shot a venomous look at Snotlout, who smirked back in reply. "And then there's Changewing Island. It's within easy sailing distance from Berk, but we've already passed it. We'd have to double back to reach it and given the head-start Dagur had, it's possible he's there already."

"But why? Why would he go there?" Gunnar asked in a small voice. He clearly hadn't forgotten the dangers of Changewing Island.

Hiccup shook his head, once again at a loss. "I don't know; maybe he knows something we don't."

"Either way, rescuing Astrid and Eret isn't gonna' be easy," Fishlegs said, trying not to sound scared. "Dagur the Deranged plus even more wild Changewings is not a happy combination."

"We'll just have to make sure that angry Berkians plus five thousand pounds of flaming Monstrous Nightmare is an even worse combination," Snotlout put in.

"We can try," Hiccup replied. "And speaking of trying, we should try to get some sleep: we've an early start tomorrow."

They curled up around the fire, each dragon wrapping a wing around his rider, Toothless gurgling softly as they settled down for the night.

9. Chapter 9

****Review Replies:****

****Quarter (Guest):** It is likewise very hard to write for a character who can't see anything, as it is equally hard to write for characters who don't speak (such as dragons and babies and the like). But thank you for your kind comment. ******

****Dot (Guest):** I'm glad you approve of the Astrid and Eret combination. They seem like two people who would be good friends, and would stick up for each other. Thanks for the review!******

* * *

><p>Chapter 9:<p>

Ruffnut stomped her foot unhappily, torch loosely grasped in one hand. Whose stupid idea was this anyway? She, Gobber, Tuffnut, and several others had wasted the entire morning looking for an entrance to the old Whispering Death tunnels under the village. When Bucket finally found one by falling into it, they'd wasted the rest of the day looking for something. Ruffnut wasn't entirely sure what: she'd stopped listening at that point to punch Tuffnut.

It was early evening, or so she guessed based on the rumbling in her stomach, and she had nothing to show for the entire day except torn fingernails and a dirty face from crawling around underground all day. _At least when the Berserkers attacked there were plenty of explosions_, she thought grumpily and kicked at a small pile of loose pebbles. Her toe hit something hard and she hissed sharply at the sudden pain and dropped her torch, then stooped down, her attention drawn.

It was a stone, and it was glowing, shifting colors from green and blue to yellow, orange, and red. She picked it up and examined it critically. It was heavier than it looked, hard and smooth, the glowing color seeming to come from within. She tossed it back and forth in her hands, thinking. It reminded her of something that had happened years earlier.

'Stones of good fortune', Gobber had called them, glowing gems that supposedly brought good luck. Instead, they had brought maddened mother dragons that nearly destroyed the village. The explosions had been great, she remembered, and seeing Fishlegs threaten Snotlout with complete and utter annihilation had made everything worthwhile. _It would be nice to see that again_, she thought wistfully, except that Fishlegs and Snotlout were gone, the village was already basically trashed, and Barf was still injured. And Eret was missing...

She shoved the glowing stone into her pocket and picked up her torch, intent on finding Tuffnut to show him what she'd found. _If _she could find him in the maze of twisting tunnels.

* * *

><p>The sun was climbing above the sea, faintly visible below the bank of dark clouds that gathered ominously on the eastern horizon. Such clouds boded a coming storm and time was running out, yet still they lingered on the spit of rock where they'd sheltered for the night. After the previous evening's conversation, opinions were sharply divided as to which direction to take. Snotlout insisted vehemently, not entirely without justification, that it was a mistake to head for Berserk Island. Fishlegs argued just as strongly that it was a waste of time to go anywhere else. Gunnar quietly sided with his teacher, while Gustav loudly suggested that they all split up in different directions until Hiccup could take it no longer.<p>

"Quiet!" he bellowed, Toothless backing him up with a roar of his own. The others fell silent. "Look, guys: we can't split up without severely compromising our mission, we can't take on all the Berserkers or an island full of Changewings by ourselves, and more than anything we can't waste any more time by standing here arguing."

Snotlout crossed his arms, clearly wanting to contradict, but Toothless stopped him with a growl.

"Maybe we should have brought Skullcrusher," Fishlegs offered timidly.

Hiccup nearly growled in frustration, only just restraining a sarcastic rejoinder that he had wanted to bring a tracking dragon.

"What do we do, chief?" asked Gustav, already astride Fanghook.

Hiccup thought, weighing possibilities, knowing that much depended on his decision. "Snotlout, why do you think Dagur isn't headed for Berserk Island?" he asked finally.

Snotlout rolled his eyes, as if the answer was obvious. "Too far, like when he took over Outcast Island: it was a strategic position from which he could attack Berk without fear of us swooping down on dragons to wipe out his tribe."

"So you think he's on Changewing Island?" The decision hung in the balance, Snotlout's answer a potential turning point of their lives.

He paused, then nodded slowly. "Yes, I do."

"Fishlegs?"

The other man looked from Hiccup to Snotlout, then back to Hiccup. "I guess so, maybe," he mumbled, fidgeting nervously. "Okay, stop pressuring me, let's just go!" he cried, throwing his hands up in defeat.

"Right then, we make for Changewing Island."

As they mounted, Toothless purred happily and Hiccup patted his head. "Is there something you've been trying to tell me, bud?" he asked lightly. Toothless trilled in response, and they rose into the air.

* * *

><p>"Astrid, why are we here?" Eret whispered, his breath tickling her cheek.<p>

She hated the answer, but it could not be avoided. "He's waiting for Hiccup, and he doesn't need the armada or an army of Berserkers when he has wild Changewings to help him get what he wants."

She felt, rather than heard, his sigh. They sat with their backs against the stone wall at the back of the cave. Dagur and Vorg were gone, having left three warriors to guard the prisoners. They stood at the mouth of the cave, tending the fire and keeping watch, their hands on their sword hilts. Astrid and Eret could talk, quietly, without being overheard.

"So what happens when Hiccup does come?" he asked.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head back. "I don't know. He won't give up Toothless, and he won't leave until we're safe." She rubbed her eyes tiredly. "But he'll come, and he'll rescue us. That's what he always does, you'll see."

Eret drew his legs up in front of him, resting wrists on knees. "Dagur will bargain for you, Astrid," he said quietly, "but he won't be giving me up any time soon."

She sat up a little straighter. "What?"

"Dagur the Deranged is the kind of man who carries grudges, and doesn't give them up. Especially when the object of a grudge is in his clutches."

She turned to face him then, drawing her legs under her. "Why would Dagur have a grudge against you?"

He looked away, a brief grimace of remembered pain crossing his face.

She hesitated, then drew him back with a gentle hand under his chin. "What aren't you telling me, Eret?"

He lowered his gaze and began to speak. "I told you that I sold dragons to the Berserkers; that was the truth, but I wasn't a dragon trapper at the time. I was an irresponsible boy just trying to have a little fun and get away from my frightened old fool of a father and the strictures of a repressively peaceful tribe."

She listened silently, letting him speak.

"Trapping dragons was fun, at first; I heard about it from one of the traders who used to visit our island. He said there were men in the archipelago who trapped dragons and sold them, dead or alive, to people who were willing to pay a small fortune for skins, teeth, horns, anything. Some friends and I decided to try it, just to see if the rumor was true. And we made good: our first catch was a Gronckle, a live one. From its sale, we earned enough to buy ourselves a small ship for our needs. Before long, we were exploring other islands, catching as many dragons as we could, selling them at home and abroad, and making ourselves very successful and very much in demand. Until my father found out."

His face darkened and his voice took on a harsher tone.

"He called us shirkers and irresponsible miscreants; he said we were wasting our time and taking needless risks. I told him that we were earning a good living, that we only risked our own lives, and that we were paid more money for one dragon than I'd ever owned in my entire life. He wouldn't hear of it, he said that we were in over our heads, that we were walking where Valkyries fear to tread. And he said we were fools, and only harm would come of our actions."

He hugged his knees tighter to his chest.

"We argued for a long time. He was a stubborn old man, my father. There were harsh words, and threats, and...bitter, bitter accusations. And at the end of it, my father disowned and banished me."

"Banished?" Astrid cocked her head, thinking. "How could he banish you unless he was -"

"Chief?" Eret finished, glancing at her. "He could, and he did, because he was chief." He took a deep breath. "My father was Oswald the Agreeable, chief of the Berserkers."

Astrid's eyes widened and she sat back, stunned and speechless. She'd known him for all of two years, only to discover suddenly that she didn't really know him at all.

"You must despise me now," he muttered. "I've hidden my past from you and your people, my younger brother is your sworn enemy, and now I've endangered your life. How can I ask you to forgive me for that?"

She didn't speak for a minute, listening to the rustling of the trees outside the cave until the silence became too heavy to bear. "People can change, Eret," she said quietly. "The people in Berk changed; you've changed, since we first met. I don't hold your family, or your past, against you."

"Well, my family is going to hold my past against me." There was a pause before he continued. "When I say that Dagur won't give me up for anything, not even Toothless, I know precisely what that means. And I know that whatever Dagur's planning for me will never be enough to assuage whatever anger or resentment he still holds against me."

There was an uncomfortable silence when he finished. They sat next to each other, backs to the wall, both thinking. Astrid finally broke the silence.

"Is that how you came to work for Drago?" she asked quietly.

He nodded. "It seems my father was right, after all. What he said about walking where Valkyries fear to tread: he meant Drago." He sighed, shuddering with the memory. "I was on my own, couldn't stay or sell my catch on Berserk Island any more. So I sailed off. My friends stayed behind, too frightened to be defiant, and for all I know, they're part of Dagur's army now. I had no one, and I couldn't trap dragons on my own. Another trader I'd met told me about Drago, so I went to see him." He paused, shaking his head. "That was the worst mistake I have ever made. Drago gave me an army of other outcasts and rejects, and then kept all of us under his thumb for years. He didn't pay their worth, but we couldn't sell dragons to anyone else without fear of punishment, and we couldn't just leave without fear of being hunted down and slaughtered by the very dragons we'd sold to him."

Astrid knew what he meant; she'd seen the scar left by one of Drago's punishments and heard the stories of his terrible vengeance against those who refused to bow before him.

"When you and Hiccup came, Astrid, I was at the end of my rope with Drago." He looked over at her, his gaze softening. "You saved my life, you and Stormfly, when you kidnapped me."

She smiled a little. "You called yourself 'son of Eret'."

"Drago didn't need to know my heritage. Nor did you."

"What will Dagur do to you?" she asked, studying his face intently.

He blinked slowly and shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "If the army and armada mean anything, the Berserk tribe has changed since I left. And probably not for the better. I wonder...I wonder if my sister is still alive."

Their conversation came to an end then, for Dagur and Vorg strode into the cave, Vorg carrying an armload of firewood. There was a brief conversation with the guards, then Dagur sauntered further in to stand over his prisoners, a most unpleasant leer on his face.

"There's a storm coming, Astrid," he said, all pretense of charm and civility gone. "You still think Hiccup's coming? Because I wouldn't pin my hopes on him getting here in one piece."

Astrid looked away, her heart beating wildly.

"Hmm, not in a talkative mood, are we?" He crouched down in front of them, hands on kneecaps. "Oh no, Dagur, I don't want to talk," he simpered, imitating her voice. "I've only spent the last hour listening to Eret's life story about how he betrayed his tribe and joined the enemy."

"There's no need to vent your bitterness on her, little brother," Eret intervened, his voice edged with threat. "This has nothing to do with her."

"How dare you speak to me!" Dagur spat, pure venom in his voice. "If Captain Vorg wasn't insisting on you being tried for treason and executed, I'd take you out right now and feed you to the Changewings myself! So shut up!" He was standing by this time, seething rage rolling off his presence.

They glared at each other, estranged brothers separated by time and space and deep personal prejudice. Astrid looked on, knowing the source but not understanding the depth of the hatred between them. Neither gave way and neither backed down, until Dagur turned his head and shouted over his soldier.

"Vorg! Boggrid! Take this one," he pointed at Eret, "to the other side of the island and keep him there. Do not let him escape, or you'll both be tried in his place. Understand?"

Vorg and the guard hastened to obey, tying Eret's hands behind his back and leading him out of the cave into the gathering darkness. Astrid watched them go, feeling her heart wrench with the first tugs of growing despair, not for herself but for the friend whose life was surely forfeit. Dagur turned his back on her, feeding the fire and waiting. She remained at the back of the cave, trembling now and crying inwardly, missing Hiccup and Erling and the familiar sights of home and family. She curled in on herself and slept, gathering her remaining strength for the coming conflict.

* * *

><p>When Ruffnut finally found her brother after another hour's wandering through the maze of tunnels, he was lying stretched on a small heap of dirt and pebbles, snoring softly, his helmet askew and one hand cradling another glowing, gem-like egg. His torch burned unattended on the ground beside him. She pulled the egg from his grasp; he grunted and stirred, but remained asleep while she compared it to her own. They were similar in size and shape, glowing vividly in every color imaginable.<p>

When she had finished her brief examination, she rolled her eyes in exasperation and kicked Tuffnut in the knee. He woke with a choked gurgle, blinking and mumbling incoherently.

"Hey," she said, prodding him none too gently, "aren't we supposed to be looking for stuff?"

"Oh yeah," he replied, brightening, "but I already found something, so I figured I'd just take a little break. It's nice, this place; kinda' reminds me of somewhere I used to hang out."

She tugged his arm, dragging him upright and shoving both eggs under his nose. "Guess what, I found one too," she said, jiggling the treasures in her hand.

"Ooh, shiny," Tuffnut exclaimed, his eyes lighting up with excitement. "Do you think Snotlout would pay us for them?"

She punched him then, once again impressed by his monumental idiocy. "Snotlout's gone, idiot. He went with Hiccup, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Too bad; he might've liked to take one of these beauties with 'im."

Ruffnut looked at the eggs in her hands, frowning with the effort of thinking. "You think we should find Gobber and show him? He'll know what to do with them."

"We don't need Gobber," Tuffnut replied confidently. "I already know what these are for. If you bury them under your house, they'll protect you from woodlice."

"Woodlice?"

"Yeah, you know, those little crawly bugs that get inside your house and chew it to bits until it just falls down around you."

His sister gave him a deeply skeptical look. "I think you're making that up," she said. "I also think we should find Gobber."

"Okay, fine," Tuffnut huffed. "But you just ask him about woodlice and he'll tell you I'm right."

Ruffnut shook her head and handed Tuffnut's egg back so she could retrieve his torch. Holding it high, they set off into the darkness in what she hoped was the way out, arguing back and forth about the necessary protections against woodlice.

****Review replies:****

****Jo (Guest):** Thanks! I'm glad you like it, and that you didn't see it coming.**

****Dot (Guest):** Thanks for the review! And Dagur has all the hallmarks of a younger sibling.**

****Guest:** Only Tuffnut would be worried about woodlice when Berk might be in the middle of a serious crisis. Thanks for reviewing!**

****Quarter (Guest):** **If you think about it, Eret has loads of self-confidence and swagger, and I don't think those are characteristics he would have developed while working for somebody like Drago. It makes sense that his background is a bit more noble. And thanks for the review!****

* * *

><p>Chapter 10:<p>

The clouds were gathering, the rain of the last few days but a precursor to the coming storm. They piled up on the horizon, the weight of accumulating precipitation pulling them ever lower until they touched the sea, two bodies of water meeting before they continued the fearful dance of autumn weather.

Gobber waited anxiously at the mouth of the tunnel, a bucket holding ten glowing eggs at his feet and an expression of uncharacteristic worry on his face. Brenna kept him company, her round face dirty and a little bit smug as she sat beside him. She had personally found four of the eggs, leading Calder and Ingmar around the tunnels, and when they'd met up with Gobber, Bucket, and Mulch, the former had praised her for her leadership and hard work.

But now they sat in the open air above the sea, waiting. Brenna knew what - or rather, whom - they were waiting for. The twins. All her life, Brenna had been taught to respect grown-ups. But even for one of her age, it was at times difficult to consider Ruffnut and Tuffnut grown-ups. They goofed off, joked around, argued constantly, and did their best to delay the inevitable assumption of adult responsibility.

But Brenna was old enough to know the role they had played in each of Berk's last several battles, and she was observant enough to have noticed a gradual change in Ruffnut over the last two years. Tuffnut hadn't changed at all, but his sister was quieter now, still rather prone to violence but less so to vocal argument. She spent less of her time with Tuffnut, and more of it with Astrid. She had ceased her flirting with the young men and boys and she avoided Snotlout outright. And lately, she was most often in Eret's company.

"Gobber," she asked out of the blue, "are Ruffnut and Eret getting married?"

Gobber started at the suddenness of the question. Brenna was just as blunt and up-front as her older sister. "Now what makes you think I'd be knowin' the answer ta that question?" he asked, stalling for

time.

"Well, you were filling in for Hiccup the last two weeks."

"That's the chief ta you, young lady. And I wasn't fillin' in, only helpin' for a while."

"The chief happens to be my brother-in-law," she reminded him tartly, with all the insouciance of a sixteen-year-old, "and you were filling in. I saw Eret ask you about that piece of land: he wants to build a house and marry Ruffnut."

"Even if he does," Gobber admonished, "it's none of your business, miss Brenna. And besides, what's all this I've been hearin' about you an' Gustav Larson?"

She blushed, horrified at what he might have heard. "N- nothing," she stammered, immediately subdued.

Gobber grinned, grateful for the momentary reprieve, but Brenna wasn't finished.

"Is Ruffnut more upset because Barf's injured," she asked after several moments' silence, "or because Eret was captured?"

"I don't know, lass," Gobber replied, shaking his head. "Is Barf any better today?"

She looked down, impulsively pulling up a few blades of grass. "He's still unresponsive, and his wound won't close or heal. Valka says she thinks there's some kind of poison in the wound, but she doesn't know what it is or how to treat it. And if Valka says that, then it must be something really horrible." She sighed, youthful impatience and apprehension expressed in a single gusting exhalation. "A lot of the other dragons are the same way," she said quietly.

There was silence between them again, shared anxiety and uncertainty settling like a weight on the ground. Gobber reached out and patted her gently on the shoulder, reassurance in his touch. "Is the little laddie all right without 'is mother?" he asked finally.

She looked up at him, her brow creasing. "Erling? He won't stop crying. My mum doesn't know what to do; he misses Astrid, and Hiccup, or maybe he's sick, or scared. We don't know."

Gobber heard the plaintive note in her voice. "We were speakin' of Ruffnut earlier, weren't we?" he said, his voice a quiet comfort. "We were jokin'. How'd we come to soundin' so worried and afraid? We're Vikings, aren't we?"

"It's all the same, isn't it, Gobber?" she replied mournfully. "Nothing ever changes and we laugh and cry about all the same things."

He stood, watching the clouds pile up on the horizon and lifting her gently by the arm. "Now you come with me, Brenna. You're too young ta be thinkin' like that; you'll bring the snows down on us early, lookin' so gloomy. Now, let's go find those twins, shall we?"

He lifted the bucket with his iron hook and descended into the

darkness of the tunnel, Brenna following with the torch as the sky darkened above them.

* * *

><p>They flew against the buffeting wind, the sea whipped into a frothing frenzy beneath them and the storm howling in their ears as they headed northwest. Hiccup couldn't see the leaping waves, but he could hear the shriek of the driving wind and feel the sting of cold rain that lashed against his cheeks. They had spread out, formation long forgotten in the struggle to stay aloft and within eyesight. The dragons were weary and their riders exhausted. Meatlug was snorting as she wobbled through the air, white steam leaving her nostrils in a steady stream. Hookfang and Fanghook, normally high flyers, had lost altitude, their wingtips occasionally skimming the highest waves. Even Toothless was tiring, the rhythm of his wings irregular and ungainly, and Wildwing was falling behind, his pace slackening rapidly.<p>

Gustav and Snotlout shouted at each other through the wind, both clinging to their dragons, urging the Nightmares higher above the waves. Fishlegs huddled miserably in the saddle, his hair plastered to his head. Gunnar fought to stay on his Nadder, numb fingers slipping on the wet saddle horn as the dragon bucked and plunged against the wind.

The storm had hit suddenly, taking them by surprise as they backtracked to Changewing Island, and a flight that should have taken three hours was stretching far beyond double that. Even with his eyes, Hiccup would no longer have been able to tell whether it was night or day, or if they were even still on course, his world a dark void of shrieking wind and driving rain.

"We have to turn back!" Fishlegs shouted, his voice squeaking as he called through the wind.

"We can't!" Hiccup replied, his cry almost lost in the storm's fury.

"The dragons, Hiccup; they're exhausted, they can't keep fighting this. Snotlout and Gustav will be swimming soon!"

Hiccup clutched Toothless tightly as a gust of wind nearly lifted him from the saddle. "There's nothing behind us, Fishlegs! We have to keep going forward."

"Land ahead!" Gustav cried, Fanghook surging aloft on a sudden updraft. He pointed, gesticulating wildly at a dark mass barely visible on the horizon. With a renewed burst of energy, the dragons pressed forward, lungs laboring and muscles trembling under the strain.

They set down on a rocky beach where the surf pounded the sand with devastating fury, every blow gouging and leaving behind a raw gash that oozed muddy seawater. Wildwing was the last to land, Gunnar tumbling off his back when he collapsed and lay trembling in the shallow runoff, his sides heaving. Gunnar crawled over and patted the dragon's neck soothingly, murmuring words of comfort despite the storm that still shrieked and raged round the rocky promontories of the island.

"We have to keep moving," Hiccup shouted, rainwater dripping from his nose. "If we stay here, we'll drown or freeze. Snotlout, Gustav, go on ahead. See if you can find some shelter."

They rose, Snotlout grumbling, and trudged up the beach, scaling the rocks and heading inland, their figures soon lost in the murky twilight of the storm. Hiccup, Fishlegs, and Gunner followed more slowly, urging the dragons up and onward in search of shelter from the storm. As they walked, Gunnar kept his hand on Wildwing's shoulder, still murmuring encouragement. Toothless led the way, hackles raised and every sense on alert. Hiccup walked beside him, conversing quietly with Fishlegs.

"Do you know where we are?" he asked, his voice low.

"This is Changewing Island all right," Fishlegs replied, trying to dry a hand to pull out his map and quickly giving up the attempt. "But we never really explored here, so we don't know what's waiting for us. There might be caves in those hills, but if there are, then they're probably home to something horrible."

"Which would be worse, Fishlegs: facing a horrible unknown, or freezing to death out here?"

"Do those have to be the only two options?" Fishlegs squeaked, his voice quavering.

"Not if we can find a nice, dry cave somewhere," Hiccup replied, "a nice, _empty_, dry cave."

They walked onward, leading the dragons, the storm lessening as they headed inland though the rain continued to pour.

* * *

><p>The back of the cave was alive with the sound of dripping water, the rain leaking through unseen cracks in the rock of the ceiling. Astrid sat, sleep abandoned, under the watchful glare of the guard as the gloom in the cave deepened, the cave entrance a wall of inky black in the flickering firelight. The shadows danced and leaped, painting the walls in lurid and ever-changing murals that told of death and flames. Dagur and his three remaining companions sat around the fire, talking quietly, their voices echoing in sibilant whispers off the stone. They were waiting, all of them, nerves on edge for whatever the future held.<p>

"He's coming, Dagur." Astrid spoke loudly, chin resting on her knees, but her voice clear. "He's coming and he won't stop until you've paid for what you've done."

Dagur stood slowly, armor painted red in the firelight, his eyes hidden in deep shadow under his helmet. "Don't speak again," he growled menacingly, warning in every syllable. But Astrid was beyond caring about consequences.

"You're finished, Dagur," she said, absolute certainty in her voice. "I know your secret now; you're not Oswald's heir, and the Berserker are not yours to lead. Eret is the real chief."

"Oh, I beg to differ," he replied, acid dripping from his tones. "Eret was a disgrace! He was banished, disowned, and now he's a traitor. He will never be chief of anything, not when I have him executed for treason! I am chief of the Berserkers, and you and your little village will bow to ME!"

She shook her head. "Our tribes were at peace, Dagur, until you became chief, and it's been almost constant warfare since then. How long do you think you have until your neighbors overthrow you?"

He turned away, refusing to acknowledge her, but she called after him. "Every wrong you've ever done, to Berk, to the Outcasts, to every other tribe in the archipelago, to your own father and brother, they're going to be redressed and you'll be ousted."

He turned back, bristling with fury, and grasped her cruelly by the chin, dragging her painfully to her feet. Face to face, he sneered at her, the stripes on his cheek stretching with the movement.

"Brave words, Astrid," he spat, "when you're my prisoner and you can't even help yourself."

"I don't need to," she whispered, teeth clenched against the pain of his fingers digging into her jaw.

The cave erupted in blinding fury then as Snotlout, Gustav, and Fishlegs burst through the entrance, their clothes streaming rainwater, each wielding a sword and buckler. They charged the three guards, engaging them at close quarters and forcing them apart, pushing them toward the walls. Their war cries echoed in the cave as they fought gallantly and with complete abandon.

In the distracting commotion of their attack, Astrid struggled wildly to free herself from Dagur's grasp, but he was both stronger and faster than she had guessed. When she tried to pull her head out of his fingers, he only squeezed harder, wrenching her head around as he twisted himself behind her, the cold iron of a dagger suddenly pricking her throat.

"One more move," he hissed, "and you're dead."

She stilled.

"STOP!" Dagur bellowed, his cry ringing through the cave and bringing the fight to a sudden halt. The attackers turned and stared, breathing quickly.

"Drop your weapons," Dagur commanded as he shuffled forward, pushing Astrid in front of him, dagger still held to her neck. "One false move and I'll be doing more than tickling her with this blade."

They hesitated, Fishlegs stealing a questioning glance at Snotlout's snarling face. It was a stalemate, Astrid's life hanging in the balance as the two sides waited on tenterhooks.

"Do it now!" Dagur shouted, squeezing harder and forcing a choked whimper from Astrid.

Without a second thought, the three of them dropped swords and shields, raising their empty hands above their heads. The Berserk

guards herded them into a corner together, Snotlout grumbling and Fishlegs squeaking in impotent anger.

Dagur was still heading toward the cave entrance, where the rain had begun to slacken. But a dark shape filled the hole, blocking his path.

Hiccup stood there, Toothless at his side and Gunnar just behind. He was bare-headed, his clothes dripping and sightless eyes almost unblinking. Astrid nearly cried out to see him again, her tensed muscles shaking under Dagur's merciless grasp. Toothless growled, teeth bared and shoulders tense, ready to spring and pounce.

"So you did come," the Berserker quipped, "though perhaps a little worse for wear."

"Let them go, Dagur," Hiccup replied, his voice quiet but firm with resolve.

"Oh, by all means...in exchange for the Night Fury."

"No, don't do it, Hiccup," Astrid gasped, squirming in earnest despite the knife-blade still pressed to her throat.

"Astrid, are you all right?" Hiccup asked, his head turning in search of her voice.

"She's been having the time of her life with me," Dagur interrupted, releasing his grip on her chin to cover her mouth with his hand, silencing her. "Haven't you, _dear_?"

Finally freed of his painful and relentless grasp, she dropped her jaw and bit down hard on his fingers. He yelped, dropping both hands in surprise, and she wiggled loose, wrenching the dagger out of his hand and scrambling away to stand beside her husband. Hiccup's companions made to run, but the guards menaced them with cold steel, keeping them in place.

Dagur examined his injured fingers, the bitemarks standing out vividly on his skin. He glared at Astrid, murderous rage in his eyes.

"I'll repeat what I said, Dagur," Hiccup said, a note of warning in his voice. "Let. Them. Go. Then we can all go home."

"Can't do that, Hiccup," he snarled, "because this is a stalemate, and you're the one with everything to lose."

"Okay. I tried to do this the peaceful way," Hiccup said resignedly. "But this is what you want, isn't it? Toothless, plasma blast!"

Toothless reared back on his hind legs and loosed a deadly bolt into the center of the cave, scattering the embers of the Berserkers' fire and plunging the interior of the cave into darkness lit only by pinpoints of glowing ash and coal. Gunnar leaped over Toothless, his axe swinging as he crashed into the nearest Berserker; the guard toppled, his feet knocked out from under him by the teen. Astrid strode into the fray too, her speed and agility keeping her just beyond the reach of the second guard. Toothless roared and pounced,

pinning Dagur under him and snarling. The final guard collapsed under a barrage of punches from Snotlout and kicks from Gustav.

Hiccup and his followers regrouped at the cave entrance, hurrying out into the steadily slackening rain to find their dragons and escape. But as they ran in a huddled group through the pine grove, the trees shifted and swayed ominously. And the wind had long since died.

11. Chapter 11

****Review Replies:****

****Jo (Guest):** Thanks for the review! And all things come in their own good time.**

****Fault (Guest):** You raise a very interesting point that had not occurred to me. Thanks for the review and I'm very glad you liked it!**

* * *

><p>Chapter 11:<p>

They found Ruffnut and Tuffnut in one of the large, open caverns from which tunnels branched and spread like strands of silk in a giant spider's web. The twins faced each other, helmets practically locked and noses nearly touching as they argued vehemently. Handing the bucket to Brenna, Gobber approached and cuffed them both soundly on the head, their helmets ringing dully in the echoing chamber. They stopped mid-sentence, looking up at their former teacher with expressions of mingled irritation and anger. Ruffnut scowled when she saw the bucket dangling from Brenna's hand.

"Now then," Gobber said when silence reigned, "I don't care who started it or why, just tell me what you two are fightin' o'er this time."

"It broke," Ruffnut griped, glaring at her twin. Next to her, Tuffnut grinned happily, the argument already forgotten.

"What broke?" was Gobber's next question.

"My egg," Ruffnut replied, her gaze drifting downward to a sloppy, bright yellow puddle on the cave's floor.

"Yeah, and it was awesome," Tuffnut said, his voice echoing cheerfully.

"Did it explode like Gronckle eggs?" Brenna piped up. She knew Tuffnut's reputation for mayhem and chaos.

"Well, not quite, but it sizzled like mutton in a skillet." He shared the information in a conspiratorial whisper. "It smelled like mutton too."

Brenna raised her eyebrows at that bit of enlightenment. Gobber was already kneeling on the floor, inspecting the puddle with seemingly unmerited eagerness. He poked at it with his iron hook, muttering to

himself and sounding altogether far too pleased with the situation. The others watched him, Ruffnut and Tuffnut speculating in loud whispers as to whether or not he planned to eat it. At long last he stood, smiling mysteriously and scratching his mustache like he always did when he'd been thinking, clearly happy about something.

"Tuffnut," he said, addressing the twin lightly, "ye wouldn't by any chance happen to be carryin' another o' those eggs, would ye?" He might have been inviting Tuffnut over for tea, such was his tone of voice.

"Uh, yeah," Tuffnut answered, mystified, and pulled the egg from an oversized pocket. Gobber took it and held it up, examining its bright glow and glittering surface with a smug and knowing look on his face.

"What is it, Gobber?" Brenna finally asked, bursting with curiosity.

"Just an idea," Gobber replied happily, carefully setting the egg atop the others and lifting the pail with his hook. "Now then, why don't we all head up top an' see if we can't go help with them dragons."

"But I sent Ingmar to help with the dragons," Brenna protested, scurrying to keep up with the others as they walked.

"Aye, miss, but I know somethin' that Ingmar doesn't," Gobber said, tapping his helmet lightly.

"Yeah, what's that?" Tuffnut asked, confusion written on his face.

"You'll see," Gobber chuckled as they climbed back toward the surface. "You'll see."

* * *

><p>Valka was in the stable, examining a wounded Hobblegrunt with an experienced eye, her sleeves rolled up as she checked the ugly gash in its side. The dragon's scales were a dull, lackluster green, so different from its usual bright yellow or red. It lay there, unmoving, as she stroked its neck gently. Giving one final pat, she moved on, visiting each injured dragon in turn. Ingmar followed behind her, watching quietly as the older woman worked, her movements unhurried but efficient. She sang softly as she made her rounds through the stable, a sad, strange song Ingmar had never heard before.<p>

I'll carry you on wings of wind,
>We'll soar above the sand,
>Until the mountains meet the clouds
>In wondrous Wilderland.

There, trees alight with radiant fire,
>Their branches edged with gold,
>Arise in armies thousands strong
>Like warriors of old.

Their leaves, like armor, clothe the hills
>In threads of finest hue,
>And flutter round their flailing limbs
>To coat the ground anew.

The rindles sing their chuckling songs
>That mock us as we mourn;
>For they can feel no sorrow there,
>Whilst we are all forlorn.

The lakes reflect the azure skies
>And ripple 'neath the breeze.
>Where water creatures swim and play
>The Great Ones take their ease.

The sun shines bright on meadowlands
>Where flowers dance and sway
>But give no thought to older things:
>Their bloom lasts but a day.

We'll walk among those ancient woods,
>Where none have walked before;
>Our feet will tread the meadow paths
>That lead us to the shore.

From thence we'll rise into the air
>Our fingers intertwined,
>Our wings above, our eyes ahead,
>Our hearts remain behind.

The song ceased when they reached Barf and Belch, the latter still keeping watch over the former. Valka knelt beside Barf, running her hands over his horn, up his head and down his neck, making calm warbling and clicking sounds to Belch as she did so. Ingmar knelt beside her.

"That's a sad song," she said, her sweet voice helping to soothe the dragon. "Where did you learn it?"

"My mother taught it to me when I was very young," Valka replied.

"Is it about dragons?" Ingmar asked eagerly. "It speaks of Great Ones...and having wings."

Valka glanced down at her companion. At fourteen, Ingmar was bright, hopeful, and could barely remember life without dragons in the village. For her, flying was as easy as walking, and twice as much fun. She loved the dragons, her gentle soul easily expanding to include each of them, even the wildest and most aggressive.

"Perhaps it is," Valka said finally, her fingers gently feeling the edges of the cut in Barf's neck. It was hard and brittle, the exposed flesh soft beneath dead skin and scales.

"What will happen to Belch if Barf...you know...dies?" Ingmar asked, her brow wrinkling in an expression of sympathetic anxiety.

Valka took her time answering. "A Zippleback can neither fly, eat enough, nor defend itself without both of its heads. If it happened,

Belch could remain here and possibly live for years. But he'd be grounded, and crippled, and someone would have to hand feed him every day. He wouldn't want that, would he?"

"No," Ingmar murmured, stroking Belch gently and offering him a fish. He refused it, shoving her hand away with his head and chirping unhappily.

"Easy there, Belch," she comforted him, "it's okay, everything's gonna' be fine." She knelt again on the floor, watching as Valka smoothed a thick ointment around Barf's wound and thinking, her young and empathetic mind trying to work through several puzzles.

"Do you worry as much for the dragons as you do for the chief?" she asked finally.

Valka stilled, and Ingmar's face fell, fearful she had been disrespectful. But the moment passed and Valka resumed her work, keeping her voice even when she answered.

"Hiccup is doin' what he thinks best," she said, "and he left us to care for the dragons. They are our responsibility, so yes, I do worry for them. But no, I worry more for my son."

Ingmar put a small, comforting arm around the older woman's shoulder, the simple gesture the best comfort she could offer. They didn't remain in that attitude long, for as they sat there, Gobber strode into the stable, Brenna, Ruffnut, and Tuffnut close at his heels.

"Valka!" the blacksmith called, his face lit with an ebullient grin. "Just the woman I wanted ta see."

"Did you find all of them?" Ingmar asked, running to inspect the contents of the bucket he carried.

"I think we did," Brenna answered, joining her friend. Gobber herded them gently aside in his eagerness to reach Valka. She stood, her eyes alight with curiosity at the bright treasures Gobber carried. He lifted one from the bucket and handed it to her, its glow lighting her face.

"It's an egg, isn't it?" she queried, cocking her head to one side and studying the brilliant orb.

"That's not just an egg," Gobber teased, his mustache twitching in his excitement. "That egg is exactly what you need ta heal these dragons."

Brenna looked up at him, dumbfounded. Ingmar frowned, not sure she had heard him aright. The twins scratched their heads, unable to keep up. And Valka quirked her eyes upward in a bemused expression.

"Explain," she said simply, still holding the egg.

So Gobber did. "These eggs were left in the old tunnels under the village; they were left there on purpose, to hatch and cause us no end o' trouble. But they're never gonna' hatch, because they're duds: no baby dragons inside."

"You mean they're infertile," Valka corrected, lifting the egg once more.

"Yeah, as ye say," Gobber continued. "If these eggs carried baby dragons, we'd have the mothers crawlin' out o' the woodwork ta get 'em back."

"Unless they were forcibly kept away," Brenna interrupted.

"Have you ever tried ta restrain a wild Changewing, Brenna?" Gobber asked pointedly.

"No."

"Didn't think so," he replied, "'cause it's near impossible. You think Nightmares are hard? Changewings are worse."

"So they're duds," Tuffnut said, finally catching on. "But how does that help our dragons?"

Ruffnut glanced up at Gobber, her expression unreadable.

"It's just a hunch, but it might work," he responded, kneeling next to Barf. "Valka, you think it's poison that's keepin' the dragons down. Well, what if that poison is Changewing acid? And what if the cure is inside that egg?"

Valka knelt beside him, still holding the egg. "You mean like fighting fire with fire? You're right," she said, gently humorous, "it is a hunch. But it's all we've got."

Quite unexpectedly, she smashed the egg against the floor, her movement surprisingly swift and strong. The onlookers gasped as the shell cracked with a loud crunch, and a thick yellow steam escaped. The sizzling followed, the egg's contents bubbling and congealing rapidly as they made contact with the air, the puddle cooling to a thick blue consistency and releasing a salty tang like the smell of the sea. When it no longer steamed or sizzled, Valka dipped her fingers into it experimentally, rubbing them together until they were coated in blue goop. With a final questioning glance at Ruffnut, she raised her hand over the wounded dragon. Ruffnut swallowed and nodded, once.

Looking down, Valka spread the goop carefully on Barf's neck, massaging and working it down into his wound with agile fingers until the exposed flesh and skin hissed and fizzed. She withdrew her hand and sat back, the others drawing close to watch. Under their wondering eyes, the dragon's flesh knit itself together, healing from the inside out until the skin closed and sealed, leaving only a faint scar and a smell of burning behind.

Belch lowered his head to sniff at the scar, licking it slightly and blinking his large yellow eyes. He gurgled, his long neck swaying sinuously, and nudged Barf with his horn. Ruffnut knelt in front of her dragon's head, watching and waiting for what seemed an eternity, until he blinked. His rubbery lips parted and a raspy hiss escaped him as he flexed his neck muscles, his head finally rising off the floor to snap inquisitively at Belch.

With a squeal, Ruffnut threw her arms around his neck, hugging as if she would never let go. Barf gurgled, dipping his head to nudge her helmet affectionately. With that, Valka was up, Ingmar and Brenna helping her administer the colorful and aromatic goop to each of the injured dragons. Before long, the formerly quiet stable was a roaring cacophony of gurgling, trilling, cooing, and squeaking dragons. A small flock of Terrible Terrors zoomed around the other dragons' heads, hooting shrilly and bumping into the walls in their excitement, until one of the female Gronckles herded them into a corner.

When all was done, every dragon stood fully healed and alert and only one egg remained. Valka wrapped it carefully in her apron and left the stable, her work finished. The others remained behind, their cheerful laughter blending with the sounds of contented or excited dragons.

Valka climbed the rise to her small house, cradling the egg and musing on unexpected miracles and their implications.

* * *

><p>Hiccup grasped Astrid's hand tightly as they ran, their feet pounding through the rain-soaked grove. There was no time for words or embraces, only the desperate struggle to evade Dagur and get off the island. Snotlout, Fishlegs, and Gunnar followed them, their panting breaths a chorus to the slap of their feet against the rocky ground. From the corner of her eyes, Astrid glimpsed the trees around them: they shimmered in the darkness of deep night, the movement a harbinger of more danger.<p>

The group pressed onward, Toothless leading them. They reached a small clearing, the other dragons huddled together at its center. Gustav ran forward, eager to mount Fanghook; before he reached the dragon, a stream of sizzling acid streaked through the air to splatter on the ground at his feet. His face blanched and he stumbled backwards in panic; every tree on the clearing's edge shimmered and danced, fully grown Changewings materializing from the tree-line to face them. They flapped their wings and shook their heads, the leaf-shaped spines on their tails rattling ominously.

In the center of the clearing Meatlug, Hookfang, Wildwing, and Fanghook crouched, facing outward. They stared at the oncoming Changewings, their pupils dilated and heads swaying. Astrid was jolted with sudden memory, inspiration blossoming with the strength of certainty.

"Everybody get down," she whispered hoarsely, creeping forward slowly. Hiccup tried to pull her backwards, but she shook him off, intent on her purpose. She approached the nearest Changewing, a massive creature as tall as the surrounding trees. It towered over the other dragons and Gunnar inhaled sharply, his eyes widening in fear brought on by sudden recognition. He had faced that dragon before, and Hiccup's ruined eyes bore witness to his shame. Astrid held her hands before her in a gesture of supplication. The dragon hissed and reared but did not attack; instead, it raised its forelegs in a mirror image of her hands, waiting. She stopped a mere foot in front of it, raising her hands higher and lowering her head, her submission complete.

The Changewing met her with its forelegs, her hands dwarfed in comparison, and slowly lowered its head to hers. Dragon met Viking in a moment of shared vulnerability, and when Astrid lifted her eyes, the Changewing cocked its head in an expression of curious interest. Heart pounding, she lifted her hand and stroked the dragon gently. It purred, clearly appreciative, and lowered its head below the level of her shoulder. She moved on, repeating the gesture with as many Changewings as she could reach. They crowded round her, swaying and bowing and lifting their forelegs, the rumble of their collected purring filling the clearing.

"What's happening?" Hiccup asked, his voice husky with suppressed anxiety.

"I don't believe it," Fishlegs whispered in awe. "But the Book of Dragons is right: Changewings mimic what they see. That's why Dagur used them to attack us."

"It's all right," Astrid replied, surrounded by purring Changewings. "We've been wrong about them all along: they _can _be trained."

"And I was right all along," cried a familiar voice. "Every stupid Viking on Berk _can _train dragons!"

Dagur strode into the clearing, flanked by his three guards, their swords drawn. "Let's try this again, shall we?" he said, his lips twisted in a smirk. "Give me the Night Fury or I'll leave you to the Changewings!"

"You don't know the least thing about dragons," Astrid shot back at him, the giant Changewing she had befriended raising its head to growl at Dagur. "These dragons aren't yours to control, just like your tribe!"

Dagur roared with anger, lifting his sword to charge her and her coterie of just-tamed dragons. But on the other side of the clearing, the trees moved again, their branches pushed back as mail-clad men spilled into the open space, Eret at the forefront. He charged, meeting Dagur's attack at the center, the dragons moving to clear the space. They circled each other, surrounded by men and dragons, every eye on the two of them.

"So it comes to this, little brother," Eret said quietly, his eyes never leaving Dagur's. "They told me everything: how you murdered our father, broke every treaty he ever made, and now you'd attack an unarmed and injured woman."

"I did what our father couldn't do, and what you wouldn't: I brought the Berserkers back to their former glory," Dagur spat in response, "and I won't stop until every tribe bows before me."

"Then I'm going to stop you, Dagur; because no tribe deserves you as chief."

With a wild scream of pure malice, Dagur lowered his blade and charged.

****Review Reply:****

****Jo (Guest):** Thanks for the review. And to answer your questions, do keep reading. ******

* * *

><p>Chapter 12:<p>

The duel was joined, neither contender willing to give ground. Dagur was small and spry, his speed and agility making up for his lack of reach. But Eret was tall, his instincts and timing perfected by years of trapping wild dragons. He met the attack with a swift parry, bringing his broadsword up for a lethal thrust. Dagur sidestepped it and swung his blade in a circle; Eret ducked, narrowly avoiding decapitation. The momentum from Dagur's swing brought his swordpoint down and to the right, momentarily exposing his left side. Quick as a snake, Eret cut upwards, aiming for the soft flesh beneath the ribs. Dagur slithered backwards, the blade scratching his arm harmlessly.

Regaining his footing, he circled the perimeter of the cleared space, snarling at his opponent. Eret watched him steadily, his sword held en garde. Dagur's next attack was more cautious: he advanced slowly, inscribing the air with his blade, his weight balanced evenly on careful feet. Eret moved with him, ducking under the whirling sword to thrust and parry. But he lost his footing on the uneven ground and mis-timed a back-handed stroke, stumbling forward as Dagur nearly took off his arm. The downswing nicked his wrist, both fighters bloodied, but he refused to disengage.

So it continued: thrust, parry, follow through, strike, block, hold, disengage. Dagur danced and spun, flitting too near and yet not near enough. Eret stood his ground, refusing to be baited. Dagur taunted him, his words like stinging gnats, but still Eret held his position and his silence, intent only on winning.

Astrid watched them from the perimeter of the circle, Hiccup's arm wrapped tightly around her. Fishlegs, Snotlout, and Gunner stood with them, their dragons to the side. Changewings surrounded them, their bright eyes following every move of the fight that raged in the clearing. The rest of the circle was composed of Berserkers, many Berserkers, none of them making any attempt to aid Dagur or subdue Eret. Astrid was too confused to understand why and too tired to care.

The fight had grown uglier, Dagur's patience wearing thin. He dropped, trying to cut Eret's feet from under him. Eret jumped the slashing blade and brought his sword down in a killing blow. Dagur rolled away, lashing out with his feet. Eret tripped on the downswing and tumbled to the ground, where Dagur pounced, losing his helmet. They rolled across the circle, swords forgotten, each grappling for a hold.

Dagur landed on top and twisted Eret's arm behind his back, landing blow after blow on his exposed neck and head. Eret roared with pain, dislodging Dagur with a heave and twisting upright. Dagur kicked him savagely in the face and he tumbled backwards, blood spurting from his nose. He struggled onto his knees, but Dagur had retrieved his sword; he slashed downward and Eret rolled out of his reach. The

momentum brought him to his feet and before Dagur could dodge out of the way, Eret kicked the sword out of the other's grip; it flicked through the air and came to rest in his hand, the point at Dagur's exposed throat.

There was a gasp from the collected onlookers at the shocking end of the conflict. Dagur, on his knees, scrabbled in the wet grass, his chest heaving with exertion.

"Do it," he spat venomously. "It's what you want."

"No, Dagur," Eret said, slowly lowering the swordpoint, "I don't want your life. I want peace, and killing you won't bring it about."

Dagur stilled, his face going blank. "I hate you," he whispered, the words a death knell.

"Vorg!" Eret called, his voice echoing in the silence of the clearing. The Berserk captain stepped forward, a rope coiled in his hand. "Bind him and take him to the beach; I'll deal with him there."

Vorg hastened to obey, deaf to Dagur's threats and pleas. They trudged back into the forest, a group of guards surrounding them. The circle broke apart, Changewings retreating to the trees or advancing to sniff inquisitively at Vikings and Berserkers. Eret stood triumphant, sword grasped loosely in his hand and nose still dripping blood. Astrid led Hiccup toward him, Toothless and the Changewing right beside them.

"So...brothers. It seems I'll have to address you differently now," Hiccup quipped as they approached. "Eret, son of Oswald, is it?"

"It's still just Eret," he corrected. "And I hope I can still call you Hiccup?"

"I hope you'll still call me friend," Hiccup returned, offering his hand. Eret accepted it gratefully, returning the gesture with vigor.

"Astrid," he said, turning to her.

"Here," she cut him off, handing him a wad of moss. "For your nose."

"Oh...thanks," he muttered, holding the moss to the bleeding appendage. "And thanks for listening."

She smiled. "Don't mention it."

"Hey, not to be a wet blanket," Snotlout interjected, "but could we get out o' here?" He was all but cowering under the invasive interest of a curious Changewing. The dragon sniffed, nuzzled, and flicked him with its tail, Gustav laughing at its efforts to get acquainted. Fishlegs was babbling under his breath, listing every known fact - and some that were quite unknown - that he could recall about Changewings.

"He's right," Astrid said, coming to Snotlout's rescue. "We should go."

"We can't," Fishlegs interjected. "Our dragons are too exhausted to fly home."

But Eret had the solution. "Follow me. There are more caves on the other side of the island, enough to hold all of us. We can stay there tonight."

They moved through the forest, headed for the caves, Astrid's Changewing friend still following at her heels. As they walked, Eret related his past to Hiccup, and all that had transpired since he had been separated from Astrid.

"Dagur didn't send his armada back to Berserk Island, as I'd thought," he explained. "He sent them around the island to wait for his signal to attack; and that's where he sent me yesterday. But he underestimated their memory and overestimated their loyalty."

"I still don't understand that," Astrid rejoined. "Why did Captain Vorg disobey the order?"

"Vorg is an old friend of mine," Eret replied, "one of the best. I told you that when I was banished, my friends remained behind on Berserk Island. Vorg was one of them, and he never forgot. It was he who kept Dagur from killing me, he who insisted I needed to be tried, and he who convinced the army of my claim to leadership and swayed them in my favor."

Astrid could only imagine what he might have said to work that miracle.

"Then we all owe Vorg our lives," Hiccup volunteered, "and I intend to honor him when we reach Berk."

"As will I," Eret agreed.

"Will you take Dagur's place as chief?" Snotlout asked.

Eret waited a bit before answering, clearly deliberating. "They need a chief," he said finally, "someone who will renew all the treaties my father established and help maintain peace in the archipelago. And I would like to see my sister again."

"What about Ruffnut?" Astrid asked, wondering what her friend would say when she learned what had transpired. Snotlout looked up, startled by her question, and started to interject, but Eret cut him off.

"I still intend to marry her, if she'll have me," he replied, his words directed more toward Hiccup than Astrid.

"Well, I think I can convince the Thorstons that you're an eligible suitor now," he replied. "But some sign of friendship with the Jorgensons wouldn't go amiss."

They had left the trees far behind and reached the shore, the expanse before them buzzing with quiet activity, ships visible at anchor in a sheltered harbor. The sky was clearing in the wake of the storm and

the moon shone brightly through shreds of cloud, its waxing orb hanging just above the horizon and illuminating the riddled face of a cliff overlooking the sea. The tide was out, the water calm in the absence of wind. Eret led them to the entrance of a large cave in the cliff, most of the dragons ducking their heads to enter.

A fire burned cheerfully inside, the smoke filling the cave with hazy warmth. There were Berserkers gathered around it, roasting fish and toasting biscuits to eat. The smell made Astrid's stomach growl; she couldn't remember exactly when she had last eaten. They sat down around the fire, Hooligans and Berserkers once again sharing a meal in peace and friendship. Astrid ate until she could eat no more, table manners completely forgotten in her hunger. When she was full she laid her head on Hiccup's shoulder, intending to sleep for what remained of the night.

Behind them, Toothless and the friendly Changewing sniffed and stared at each other, jostling for position until they reached some form of accord and lay down, the Changewing practically curled round Astrid and Hiccup. The latter stroked his wife's hair gently, whispering soft words in her ear.

"I think he likes you," he murmured, referring to the Changewing. "Leave it to my wife to figure out how to train a Changewing."

"I'm going to miss him when we leave," she mumbled sleepily.

"Why leave him behind?" Hiccup asked.

"What?"

"Well, Stormfly flies with Brenna, and Toothless and I are back in the air, but I don't want you confined to the ground any longer." He paused and took a deep breath. "I was wrong to ask that of you, and I'm sorry. But you can start again; bring your friend home and fly with him."

That got her attention. "You mean it?" she asked, lifting her head from his shoulder. "What about Erling?"

"He won't be a baby forever. And in some ways, his mother's a better dragon rider than I am. Besides, Changewings have a strong maternal instinct; your new friend will love our son."

She wrapped her arms around him. "Thank you for that," she whispered in his ear. "And I forgive you. For everything else."

"No punches this time?" he asked lightly.

"No, but don't think you don't deserve one," she replied, laying her head back on his shoulder.

He stroked her hair again, his touch infinitely gentle, and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. They rested in each other's arms until the sun rose.

* * *

><p>The morning came, bright and clear but with an unmistakable chill that heralded the coming winter. All was busy on the beach, everyone

preparing to depart by various means and in different directions. Changewings watched from the trees, neither showing themselves nor indicating aggression. Fishlegs, Snotlout, Gunner, and Gustav left for Berk shortly after breakfast, Snotlout reluctantly leaving Hookfang behind to ride Fanghook with Gustav. Eret, Hiccup, and Astrid would follow later.<p>

All was busy commotion and organization, half of the ships returning to Berserk Island, the other half headed to Berk to assist in rebuilding the village before winter. Dagur was to be taken under guard to his former seat of power, there to be tried upon Eret's investiture as chief. The latter would return to Berk temporarily before returning to the island of his birth.

Astrid watched the ships leave, their proud hulls cutting through the waves and sails billowing in the brisk wind. The giant Changewing sat on the cliff beside her, its scales the color of the grass on which it reclined. She stroked it gently, amazed at the texture of its skin and its coos of contentment.

"What am I going to call you, then?" she asked. The dragon cocked its head and warbled. She smiled. "I'll think of something," she said conspiratorially, leaning back and humming softly. Footsteps approached behind her, the soft _thump _of a boot contrasting with the telltale _scritch-scratch _of metal on rock.

"Afternoon, m'lady," Hiccup greeted her cheerfully, sitting down next to her on the cliff. She looked at him, drinking in his lean limbs and unkempt hair, the bangs growing back over his scarred forehead and the subconscious gestures she had once gently mocked.

"Would you do it differently?" she asked suddenly.

His head turned toward her, a bemused expression on his face. "What?"

"When Dagur was about to attack us, your mother wanted you to negotiate. But if you had, Dagur would still be chief of the Berserkers and Eret would still be a farmer who couldn't afford to marry the girl he loves." She took his hand, lacing her fingers between his. "Would you go back and do it differently if you could?"

He chuckled. "What a way to ask," he chided.

"I'm serious," was her rejoinder. "Would you?"

He grew serious. "I'm sorry that my actions cost lives...and that I didn't try harder to prevent war. But no, I wouldn't do it differently. None of it."

He squeezed her hand and continued. "We're allied with the Berserkers now, not just at peace, and you've tamed a Changewing. We're better off than we were before all of this happened. Even before I brought the students here."

Better off, but for one thing. "But your eyes... "

He shook his head. "It's just like my leg: I'll get used to it."

Below them, Hookfang rose into the air, Eret in the saddle. They climbed steadily, the Nightmare's powerful wings pushing them upwards to the top of the cliff.

"Are you ready?" Eret called to them as Hookfang hovered.

Hiccup climbed into Toothless' saddle, hooking his leg into the mechanized stirrup with practiced ease.

"Will you be all right?" he asked Astrid.

She was already astride the Changewing, gripping its ridged spine between her knees. "As always," she called back, and Toothless took off. She leaned forward, stroking her mount gently on the head.

"Let's go, my friend," she encouraged, and with a leap of his powerful legs, the dragon was in the air, his mighty wings expanding to catch up with Toothless and Hookfang.

They soared through the afternoon sky as the sun trod its age-old path, and set down in Berk as it touched the sea, the water stained with liquid fire.

13. Chapter 13

****Review Replies: ****

****Fault (Guest): Thank you. I'm glad you liked it.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 13:<p>

Their coming was not unexpected, the other riders having already related a small part of the tale. A crowd met them on the hill below the Great Hall, Gobber and Valka at the forefront. There was a gasp of wonder when Astrid dismounted from her Changewing, her legs a bit wobbly from the long flight: she hadn't flown without a proper saddle in years. Hiccup led her and Eret into the Hall, flanked by the dragons, the crowd gathering behind them. Once inside, he stood on the raised dais that was the seat of the chieftain's authority, and raised his voice.

"People of Berk," he cried, stilling the murmurs, "we have resolved our differences with the Berserk tribe, and do declare peace and alliance with them from this day henceforth."

"What about Dagur?" Gobber asked in shocked disbelief.

"Dagur has been stripped of his authority and is to stand trial before his people for his crimes. The Berserkers have a new chief to lead them." He stepped forward and took Eret's arm, raising it above his head. "I give you Eret, son of Oswald the Agreeable, chief of the Berserkers!"

The Hall erupted with shouts of shock, surprise, and disbelief, Berk's inhabitants not entirely convinced. But Astrid watched

Ruffnut's face light up with an expression of hope, her blue eyes brightening in the candle light. Tuffnut took the opportunity to punch her in the arm and the moment was broken as she turned to repay him with a hearty _smack _on his jaw. Their parents stood behind, Mr. Thorston wearing a very crafty expression and Mrs. Thorston scolding her daughter for comporting herself like a common hoodlum. Astrid smiled to herself; Hiccup had been right about them. He continued when the shouting died down.

"As a sign of the alliance between our tribes, I give him the hand of Ruffnut Thorston in marriage. May their bond be strong, and strengthen the connections between Berk and Berserkers."

Eret strode into the crowd and took Ruffnut's hand into his own, leading her to the dais. He stood next to Hiccup, his handsome face lit with a broad smile.

"In token of the debt I owe to Berk and its people," he said, his voice booming in the space, "I will bestow gifts on this village when I am made chief, and may Odin smile upon us!"

There was feasting then, Vikings celebrating the new alliance, the upcoming wedding, and the safe return of their chief in one raucous party. But Astrid wandered through the crowd, looking for one person in particular.

Brenna held a quiet Erling in her arms, rocking him in one corner of the Hall. He had one leg of Hiccup's toy Nadder in his mouth, chewing and sucking with vigor. Astrid took her child in her arms, smiling so broadly she thought her face might split. Brenna gave her a knowing smile as she cradled him.

"You will never guess what's happened," she declared, her eyes sparkling.

"Why, what's happened?" Astrid asked distractedly.

Hiccup started when he heard Astrid calling his name, her tone a strange blend of urgency and excitement. She grasped his arm and practically dragged him out of his seat.

"Feel this," she commanded, placing his finger inside Erling's open mouth. A thrill went through him when he felt a tiny, sharp _something _protruding through the baby's slobbery gums.

"Is it a tooth?" he asked, smiling.

"Yes, yes, yes," Astrid exulted, bouncing her little boy up and down in her arms. "There are two of them, and Brenna says he hasn't cried once since they came in."

"Aye, the little laddie stopped weepin' soon as he cut those fine little pearlies," Gobber said, joining them and nearly knocking Hiccup over with a hearty clap on the back.

Astrid twirled her child around, utterly forgetful of her injured wrist, joy to be home written on her face. The whole village danced under the watchful gaze of the dragons, every soul contented and rejoicing.

* * *

><p>The Berserk ships arrived two days later, drawing up to Berk's docks and dropping anchor under lowering clouds heavy with promised snow. The days were growing steadily colder, Astrid wrapping Erling in fur and taking him everywhere she went. For a span of two weeks, she barely saw Hiccup during the day, his every moment spent in repairs or making plans with Eret and Fishlegs to map the interior of Changewing Island and draw up a new treaty between Berk and the Berserkers. The race was on to rebuild Berk and hold the wedding before winter came and drove the villagers indoors for a period of months. But with dragons and many extra hands to help, the repairs were finished in record time, and Eret prepared to depart.<p>

The wedding was held on the first day of winter, the first light snow falling to melt on dry, brittle grass. Ruffnut was radiant in white, her long hair gleaming in the flickering firelight. Eret presented the Jorgenson and Thorston clans with generous gifts of armor and swords raided from the Berserk ships in the harbor; Spitelout declared that the gift more than compensated for the lost bride-price, and the Thorstons were congratulated throughout Berk for having been paid twice for one daughter's hand. Hiccup officiated, with both Hooligans and Berserkers as witnesses to the ceremony; and the feast lasted for three joyous days. It would have gone on longer, but on the third day Gobber announced rather loudly that if they didn't stop drinking soon, there would be no mead left for Snoggleto.

The ships sailed the following day, Ruffnut having bidden Barf an uncharacteristically tearful goodbye and punched her brother one last time. Hiccup and Astrid followed by dragon three days later, Hiccup hoping to make good on his promise to help ensure a peaceful transition of leadership.

Captain Vorg awaited them on Berserk Island, his efforts and influence having prepared the people for the arrival of their new chief and his wife. But there was ill news as well.

"He escaped? How?" Eret demanded, his face thunderous and his voice echoing in the empty Mead Hall.

Captain Vorg knelt before him, his face downcast. "I take full responsibility, my lord," he explained. "There was some trouble at first, just after we arrived and spread the word of your coming. Some of Dagur's supporters broke into the prison during the disturbance and helped him escape. Most of them were caught, my lord, but he stole a fishing boat and got away."

Eret stood with his arms crossed, a scowl on his strong face while he deliberated what to do and say. Hiccup, Astrid, and Ruffnut watched, concern in their eyes.

"Because I owe you my life and my position," Eret finally said, "you will suffer no punishment for this."

Vorg looked up at him with an expression of gratitude.

"But if Dagur ever returns to these shores to cause trouble," he continued, "he will suffer the consequences, and I expect you to be always on the alert, or you will suffer with him."

"Yes, my lord," Vorg promised, "I will." He stood, bowing and taking his leave.

Eret watched him go, heaving a sigh of frustration. His first week as chief, and already there was trouble. Ruffnut put a comforting arm around his waist and he looked down at her with a small smile.

"I'm sorry, Ruff," he said, wrapping his arms around her. "Brand new home, brand new life, and already there's trouble." She enjoyed his embrace for a few seconds, then drew away suddenly and punched him on the arm.

"Ow!" he yelped, rubbing his bruised bicep.

"You blockhead! If there's trouble, fix it!" she demanded pointedly.

Hearing their exchange, Hiccup leaned over to whisper in Astrid's ear. "Glad I'm not the only one who has to put up with domestic abuse."

"Oh, hush," she chided, pushing him away gently.

He raised his voice, addressing Eret formally. "If Dagur ever does come back to cause trouble, you can count on help from Berk," he volunteered.

"And you have the dragons," Astrid added.

"Thanks for the reminder," Eret replied as they left the Mead Hall together.

* * *

><p>Hiccup and Astrid stayed a week then flew home, Toothless leading with Astrid's Changewing mount close behind. She had decided to call him Brother, an unusual name for a dragon. Hiccup had laughingly pointed out that the dragon treated her more like its child than its sibling, but she ignored his teasing. Brother was special, the first trained Changewing on Berk, powerful and mysterious and more protective than any dragon she had ever known before. And he loved Erling.<p>

Winter took hold and the snow piled in deep drifts that buried houses and lured unsuspecting Vikings into their grip. Young children practiced their combat skills with intense snow ball fights, heading home after sunset with rosy, frost-tinged cheeks. The dragons huddled together in the stable, the fire in their bellies warming the cold stone beneath them. Hiccup and Astrid flew together every day, Hiccup learning to trust Toothless more than ever, and to hear and feel and smell what he could not see. They came home late at night, windblown and weary, and enjoyed each other with an unfettered freedom they had never felt before. And though Hiccup could not see, he could feel Astrid's smile on her face, and hear her laughter, and taste her in every loving kiss; and he considered that his eyesight was a small price to pay for every gift he'd been given.

* * *

><p>Valka trudged up the hill toward the chief's home one evening, a cloth-wrapped bundle in her hands, her feet cutting a clear path through fresh-fallen snow. Astrid answered her knock, Erling propped on her hip. Valka smiled when she saw him, and he giggled, showing his fine, new teeth. She set the bundle down on the table and sat to warm her hands at the fire.<p>

Hiccup raised his head from where he sat working a scrap of leather, his nimble fingers moving confidently. "Mom?" he asked, confirming the owner of the light step and subtle knock.

"Hiccup," she said in answer, "did Gobber tell ye what he found under the village?"

"No, he didn't," he answered, "and I forgot to ask."

"He found Changewing eggs, as ye thought he would," she told him, "but they were all infertile, and they never would've hatched."

"Then Dagur's plan, whatever it was, backfired beautifully," Astrid commented, Erling sitting in her lap and attempting to chew the end of her braid.

"More than ye know, Astrid," Valka replied. "Dagur tried to cripple us by having his warriors coat their swords and axe-blades with Changewing acid."

Hiccup frowned, painful memories intruding on his thoughts. Valka wasn't finished though.

"But he brought us the cure with the malady. The only antidote to Changewing acid lies inside their eggs."

Astrid inhaled sharply. "So, all of our dragons...that's how you saved them?"

Valka smiled, remembering. "The stable was quite a sight that day."

"Well," Hiccup breathed, "I guess Fishlegs will have to update the Book of Dragons again."

"There's more, Hiccup," Valka said, standing and walking to the table to unwrap the bundle. The canvas wrapping fell away to reveal an egg, its translucent shell glowing brightly. Toothless perked up his head, his eyes narrowing as he tried to focus on the shifting colors. Valka picked it up and set it in Hiccup's hand. "There was one egg left," she murmured.

He laid the leather scrap aside to run his hands over the smooth surface. It was cold and heavy, the shape and feel of it as he remembered. "Stones of good fortune," he whispered, so quietly Astrid almost didn't hear.

"You think it will cure a burn, don't you," she said. It was a statement, not a question.

"It's worth a try," Valka responded, her hand resting atop Hiccup's. "But only if ye want it."

Hiccup sat quietly for a long time, while the fire crackled and Erling giggled. Toothless padded forward to nuzzle his rider and gave the egg an experimental lick. Hiccup huffed, letting out a long exhalation through clenched teeth.

"Let's just...try it," he said finally, shaking his head.

Valka took the egg from his hands and smashed it against the hearthstone; Erling cried at the sudden noise, but calmed at the scent of crushed grass and wildflowers. Astrid lifted her eyebrows in surprise, watching as Valka dipped her hand in the sticky purple goo and rubbed it all over Hiccup's face, coating his nose, cheeks, and forehead, dabbing it on eyes and eyelids. Hiccup struggled and hissed, his scarred skin steaming where the strange substance made contact and his eyes streaming tears. Astrid grasped his hand and Erling began to cry again.

The paroxysm passed and Hiccup panted in its wake, blinking rapidly. Erling still cried fitfully and Valka wiped the remaining goo from her fingers. Astrid knelt before Hiccup, still gripping his hand tightly, and looked up in his face.

The scars were gone, his skin as smooth and even as Erling's. He continued to blink, until Astrid put her hand to his cheek. He flinched, and the blinking slowed.

"A- Astrid?" he breathed. His eyes were in shadow, hidden from her gaze.

"Can you see me?" she asked, her breath quickening.

He blinked again, and time stood still. "Yes," he whispered, and in the next instant her arms were around him, hugging as if she would never let go.

There was little sleep in the Haddock home that night, and when Snoggletog came that winter, the village of Berk celebrated more than the holiday. They celebrated those they had lost in the battle against Dagur; they celebrated the new-made peace with Eret; and they celebrated a future in which every hidden thing would make itself known in due time, and secrets held no fear.

Epilogue:

_This is Berk. Small, snow-bound, settled long ago by Vikings who knew little of the world around them. We know what they did not. We have faced our enemies, and made friends of them. We have welcomed the lowly stranger, to see him rise up a chieftain. We have made peace, where others have wanted only war. We make the future, and the struggles of the past are a small price to pay for that privilege.

—

We are Dragon Riders. All of us.

The End

* * *

><p>AN: I would like to bestow many thanks on everybody who

read, reviewed, favorited, or followed this story; I truly hope you have enjoyed reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it, and that it fulfilled your expectations but also took you by surprise now and then. A very big thank you is due to ZefronsAngel, who reviewed literally every chapter and who wasn't afraid to point out flaws in characterization and plot. Your honesty and tact are very much appreciated; thank you. **

On another note, there is a sequel in the works. It may have to wait for publication until Christmas, however, as the strictures of schoolwork and other responsibilities are dictating my schedule. I can tell you that the title is Revealed, and that it will feature more Changewings, more Berserkers, and quite a few surprises. Stay tuned!

Constantinus

End
file.